STREET AND SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY

10 CENTS

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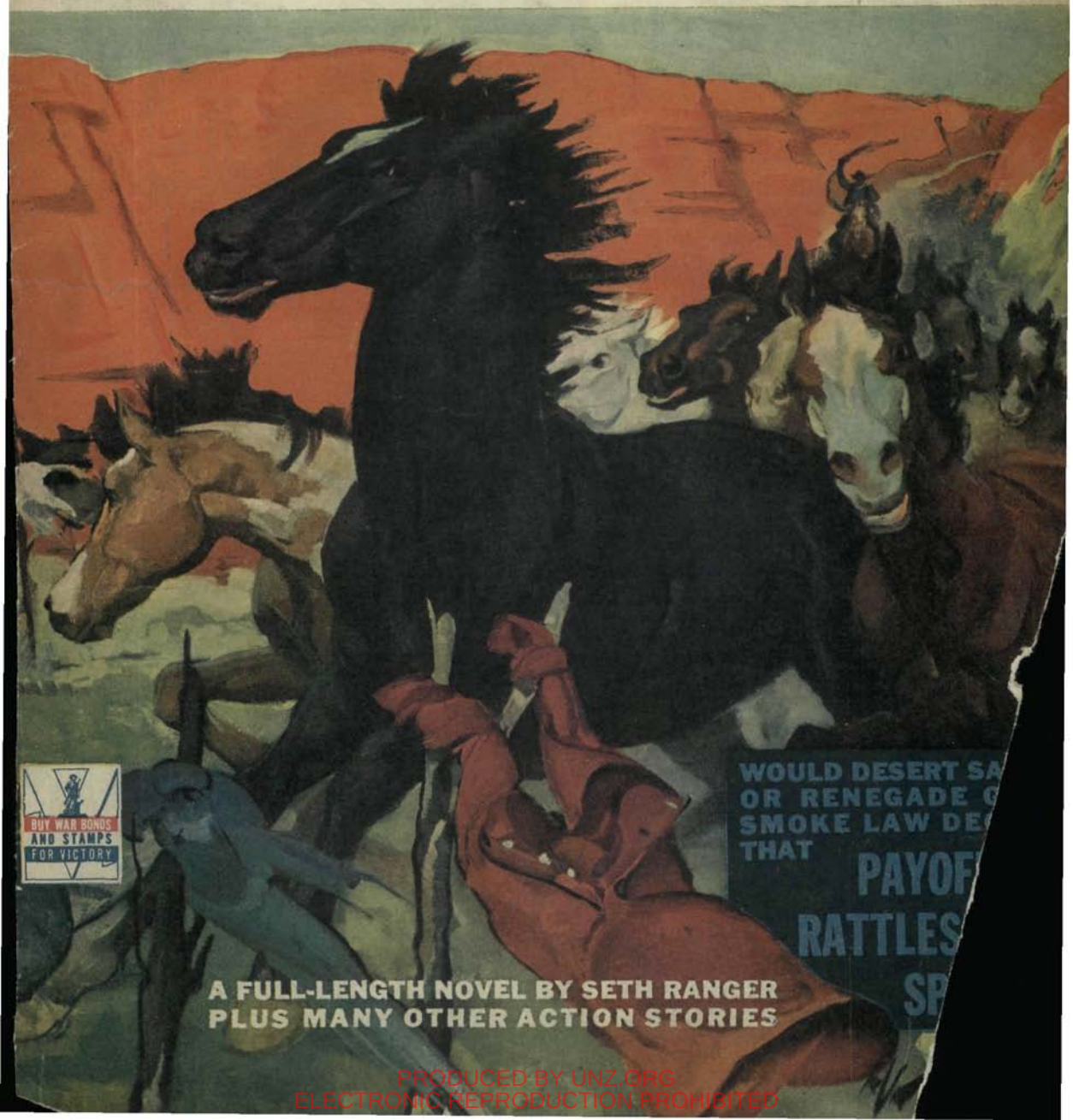
AUGUST 8, 1942



WOULD DESERT SA
OR RENEGADE G
SMOKE LAW DE
THAT
PAYOF
RATTLES
SP

A FULL-LENGTH NOVEL BY SETH RANGER
PLUS MANY OTHER ACTION STORIES

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BOB WAS FOOLED . . . he thought he could get rid of those distressing flakes and scales with one application of some overnight remedy. He found, however, that it required persistent treatment, and used Listerine Antiseptic and massage twice daily to fight the condition. Now his scalp feels "like a million."

AND SO WAS MRS. K . . . she had blamed her itching, irritated scalp on reducing and changed her diet. Then an advertisement suggested that the condition might be the infectious type of dandruff. "It's simply wonderful," she says, "how Listerine Antiseptic and massage helped me."

ITCHY SCALP?... TELL-TALE FLAKES?... UGLY SCALES?

IT MAY BE INFECTIOUS DANDRUFF!

AND in the infectious type of dandruff millions of germs are active on your scalp. Now, isn't it sensible to fight an infection with a treatment that *kills germs?* Listerine Antiseptic and massage, the *germ* treatment, does just that—and often brings wonderful improvement! When you massage Listerine onto your scalp, millions of germs associated with infectious dandruff are literally "blitzed" to death.

Kills "Bottle Bacillus"

Even large numbers of *Pityrosporum ovale*, the stubborn "bottle bacillus" which many leading authorities recognize as a causative agent of infectious dandruff, are destroyed by Listerine's quick, germ-killing action!

The Listerine Antiseptic treatment is simple, easy, delightful. It gives your scalp and hair a cooling antiseptic bath . . . and here's what happens, as shown by a large majority of clinical test cases: **1.** Loosened, ugly flakes and scales begin to disappear. **2.** Itching and irritation are relieved. **3.** Inflammation is allayed. **4.** Your scalp feels healthier, your hair looks cleaner.

76% Improved in Clinical Tests

We said that Listerine was tested. That's under-statement. Listerine Antiseptic was tested under exacting scientific supervision. Listerine was tested under severe clinical conditions. *And, in a series of clinical tests, 76% of the dandruff sufferers who used Listerine and massage twice a day showed complete disappearance of, or marked improvement in, the symptoms within a month!*

If you wish more evidence, add to the above the constant stream of letters from people who use Listerine Antiseptic at home. They're overjoyed with the way Listerine gets after the symptoms of infectious dandruff.

So don't delay. Neglect may aggravate the trouble. Start in today with Listerine Antiseptic and massage. It has helped so many others, it may help you. Remember—Listerine is the same antiseptic that has been famous for more than 50 years as a mouth wash and gargle.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO., *St. Louis, Mo.*

LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC

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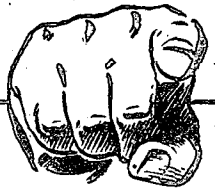
What are YOU doing to defeat America's enemies?



NOT all of us can serve our country in uniform.

But every man in America can serve Uncle Sam by doing his job more efficiently than ever before — and thus help to outproduce the gangster nations, and smash "totalityranny" on the industrial front, as on the military and naval fronts!

It is your duty to secure the sound, practical training that will help you to perform your job better! There are several ways you can secure this training — and one which has proved its worth during the past 50 years is the International Correspondence Schools.

Right now, more than 100,000 Americans are studying I. C. S. Courses in 400 different subjects. For a few dollars monthly, and a few hours of their spare time each week, they are getting the *modern training* that will help them do their present job better, and fit them for a more responsible position in their line of work.

Join the army of trained men that is helping to outproduce the Axis! Mail this coupon for information — right now!

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HELPING TO TRAIN AMERICANS FOR VICTORY

LET'S GO! U.S.A. KEEP 'EM FLYING!

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Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, "Who Wins and Why," and full particulars about the course *before* which I have marked X:

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British residents send coupon to I. C. S., 71 Kingsway, London, W. C. 2, England

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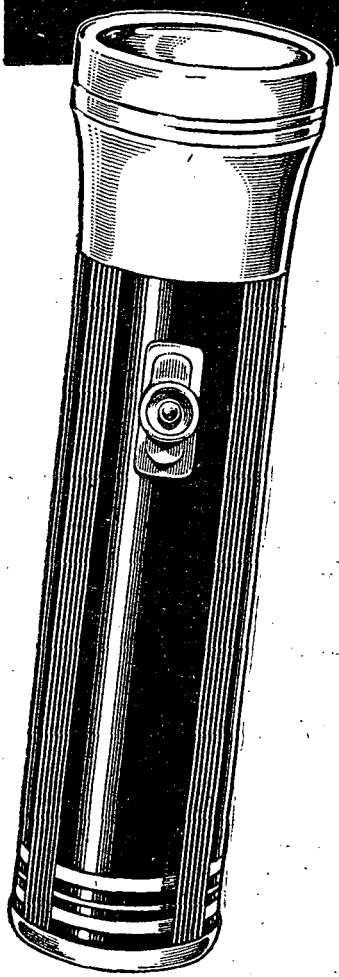
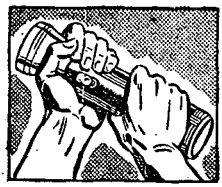
New! SPECIAL EVEREADY FLASHLIGHT

TRADE-MARK

FOR CIVILIAN WARTIME USE!

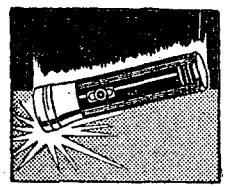


Made of special 5-ply fibre, new laboratory-tested design saves copper, brass, nickel, chromium and other metals vital to war use!



STRONG! . . . Made of special fibre sheets, tightly laminated in 5 layers, the tube is tough and hard. It will give long years of service!

WATER-REPELLENT! This new "Eveready" flashlight is protected by a special water-proof coating which seals out moisture.



LONG LASTING! . . . Drop it on concrete floor—this flashlight case can "take" ordinary abuse. It's actually more durable than millions of flashlights now in use.

METALS HAVE GONE TO WAR!

But metals or no metals, America needs flashlights . . . at home, in business, on the farm, in the factory . . . needs them for a thousand vital civilian uses.

And America shall have them!

This national need—made more pressing than ever by wartime emergency conditions—has been answered by the world's largest flashlight-and-battery laboratory.

Here it is—the new "Eveready" flashlight made of tough, 5-ply fibre—tested and proven under severest laboratory conditions.

Yet it is made virtually *without* the use of metal. Soon available at all dealers!

NATIONAL CARBON COMPANY, INC.
30 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y.
Unit of Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation

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The word "Eveready" is a registered trade-mark of National Carbon Company, Inc.

Keep flashlights loaded with dependable fresh DATED *"Eveready" batteries—and have an extra set on hand for your light in case of long-*

FRESH BATTERIES LAST LONGER . . .
***Look for the* DATE-LINE**

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STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY

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CONTENTS FOR AUGUST 8, 1942 VOL. CCI, No. 6

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PAYOFF AT RATTLESNAKE SPRINGS . . . **Seth Ranger** 9

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COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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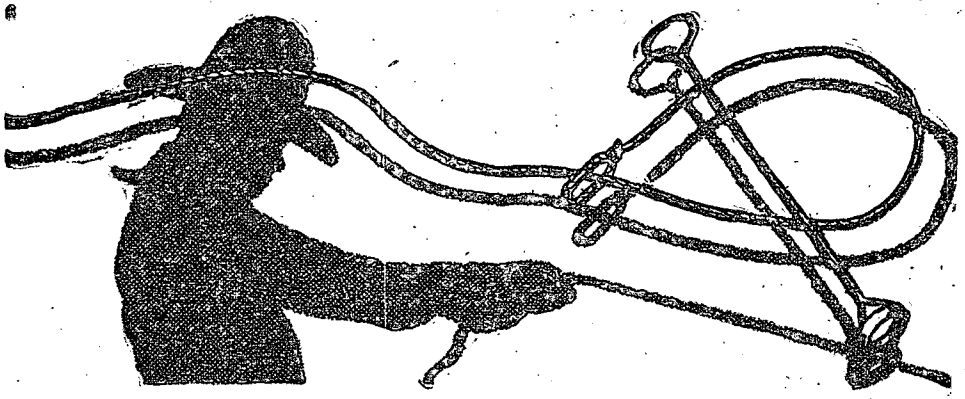

The Roundup

WITH everyone these days going hither and yon, let's add to the record the pasear of a pair of our ever-active Western authors, an account of which we just received from one of our top-hand writers, Ray Nafziger. Seems like Ray and another writin' hombre, whom you all know, Don Alviso, got together and had themselves a right fine jaunt. Here's what Ray has to say:

"A few weeks ago, Don Alviso, another of your contributors, and I took a little trip to Panamint City. Our trail led us up a canyon in the mountain range bordering the west side of Death Valley. No horses were available and we had to hike—only a little over five miles, but every foot was just a few inches up. Don did it without even sweating, but then he's young enough to have made it into the Navy a couple of weeks ago and is now in training as a bombardier. After he comes back, writing about six-guns is liable to be a little tame for him! That Panamint is really an interesting old mining camp; all the buildings there were built of rock instead of the usual logs or adobe or boards. And, although it's just a little walk in a straight line from Death Valley, we traveled through a beautiful canyon with a nice stream of water."

Those writin' hombres of ours sure do get around, no question about that. And that's one of the reasons, we feel, that our stories are authentic—because our writers take their stories right from the scene of action.

We wish the best in the world to our amigo, Don Alviso, and whereas we are sorry to lose him for the time being as a contributor, we're right proud that he's doing a job for Uncle Sam. And we'll all welcome him back when this ruckus is over.

On next week's line-up—E. B. Mann leads off a top issue with a fast-shooting, dynamite-packed full-length novel entitled OUTLAW'S EDEN, the story of salty young Bill Ball who followed a gun-fogged trail into a renegade stronghold to tangle with the shrewdest, most ruthless owl-hooter who ever defied the law. Other outstanding yarns include PAYOFF AT POKER GULCH, by Ray Palmer Tracy; RACETRACK RETRIBUTION, by H. A. DeRosso; GUN RANCH, by Mark Lish, and JOURNEY UPSTREAM, by Jim Kjelgaard. And, of course, you'll find a full string of departments.

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Make me Prove

THAT I CAN TRAIN YOU AT HOME FOR A Good Job in Radio

I TRAINED THESE MEN

Here is a quick way to better pay. Radio offers you the opportunity to make $5, $10 a week extra in spare time a few months from now and to prepare for good full time Radio jobs paying up to $50 a week. MAIL COUPON. Get my Sample Lesson FREE. Examine it, read it—see how easy it is to understand. See how I train you at home in spare time to be a Radio Operator or Radio Technician.

WHY MANY RADIO TECHNICIANS MAKE $30, $40, $50, A WEEK

The Radio repair business is booming as manufacturers have stopped making new sets and the country's 57,400,000 home and auto sets are becoming older, needing more repairs, new tubes, parts. This is opening new opportunities for full time and part time Radio Technicians to get good jobs, or to open their own Radio repair businesses. Radio Technicians and Operators hold good jobs in the country's 882 Broadcasting Stations and in Aviation, Police, Commercial, Marine and Government Radio. Loud Speaker Systems give good jobs to many. The Government is calling for Civilian Radio Technicians and Operators. Government orders for millions of dollars worth of Radio equipment offer opportunities in Radio factories. Men with Radio Training are in line for extra rank and pay in the Army and Navy. Many Radio developments such as Television, held back by the war, will make Radio a live-wire field for the future.

BEGINNERS SOON LEARN TO EARN $5, $10 A WEEK EXTRA IN SPARE TIME

Due to the boom in the Radio repair business, practically every neighborhood offers opportunities for a good part time Radio Technician to make extra money fixing Radio sets. I give you special training to show you how to start cashing in on these opportunities early. You get Radio parts and instructions for conducting experiments and building test equipment to help you do better, faster Radio repair work. My 50-50 method—half working with Radio parts I send you, half studying lesson texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, gives you valuable practical experience.

FIND OUT HOW I TRAIN YOU AT HOME FOR GOOD PAY IN RADIO

MAIL THE COUPON. I'll send you a Sample Lesson and my 64-page book FREE. Learn about my Course; the types of jobs in different branches of Radio. Read letters from more than 100 men I have trained so you can see what they are doing, earning. MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope or paste it on a penny postal.

J. E. SMITH, President,
Dept. 2GD
National Radio Institute,
Washington, D. C.

$10 a Week Extra in Spare Time

I repaired some Radio sets when I was on my tenth lesson. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made $600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of $10 a week—just spare time.

JOHN JERRY
1729 Penn St.
Denver, Colorado

Radio Technician at Ordnance Works

I am now Chief Radio Technician at _____ Ordnance Works and very pleased with my new position. If I had not taken the N. R. I. Course I might be digging ditches, or perhaps unemployed.

R. S. LEWIS
(Address omitted for military reasons.)

$200 a Month in Own Business

For several years I have been in business for myself making around $200 a month. Business has steadily increased. I have N.R.I. to thank for my start in this field.

ARLIE J. FROEHNER
300 W. Texas Avenue
Goose Creek, Texas

Extra Pay in Army, Navy, Too

Every man likely to go into military service, every soldier, sailor, marine, should mail the Coupon Now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duty at pay up to several times a private's base pay. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. IT'S SMART TO TRAIN FOR RADIO NOW!

GOOD FOR BOTH 64 PAGE BOOK SAMPLE LESSON **FREE**

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 2GD
NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE, Washington, D. C.

Mail me FREE, without obligation, Sample Lesson and 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio." (No Salesman will call. Write plainly.)

Age.....

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This is War!

AND HERE'S WHO'S FIGHTING IT!

NEVER before—a complete, comprehensive work called WHO'S WHO IN UNIFORM!

It's the most thorough book on this subject ever published. The one volume that contains all information and provides a simplified method for determining:

The rank and branch of service of the Army, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard, Red Cross, Civilian Defense, and affiliated Services of the United States, its Allies and its enemies!

There are over 500 illustrations, many of them in color.

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(30c in Canada)

If your dealer cannot supply you, fill out this coupon:

WHO'S WHO IN UNIFORM

79 SEVENTH AVENUE, NEW YORK CITY

Inclosed is twenty-five cents (thirty cents in Canada). Kindly send me my copy of WHO'S WHO IN UNIFORM.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

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After a one-hundred-and-fifty-foot climb that was sheer torture, Spruce reached the rope and began pulling it down.

CHAPTER I

A CHALLENGE

DAVE LOGG, forest ranger at the Indian River Civilian Conservation Corps camp, grinned as he read the two advertisements in the *Evening Leader*.

"Here's a job for you," he told Spruce Renfro, the camp's best-dressed man. "The second advertisement is the one I think is right down your street."

Spruce took the paper and read:

WANTED: Fifteen or twenty young men between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-five who think they are tough, and *are* tough. Good pay and plenty of hard work and fighting for the right men, with opportunity for future security. Cream puffs needn't apply. Call Tuesday morning, in person, on editor of the *Evening Leader*.

WANTED: A two-fisted, hard-hitting man who can handle the above described tough customers. Applicants must be able to get a maximum of work and fight out of these men. Call Tuesday evening at the *Evening Leader* office. Ask for the editor.

"I wonder what the play is?" Spruce mused. "It's nothing for me, though. You know, Dave, I don't go out looking for trouble. If it comes my way, naturally I don't side-step it. Still, that advertise-

PAYOFF AT RATTLESNAKE SPRINGS

by Seth Ranger

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ment is a challenge, isn't it? I don't mean I think I'm *that* good. But I'd like to give a proposition like that a whirl just to see how I came out."

"Then why don't you take it?" Dave asked. "We'll give you a discharge from the CCC. Things are quiet now anyway. You can come back, later."

Spruce shook his head. "No. It's too much like saying, 'I'm good and I know it! I'm sticking my neck out. I'm asking for it! Slap me down'!"

"I guess you're right," Dave admitted. "The kind of man who could get along with a tough crowd would start with two strikes on him by asking for the job."

Spruce was sitting in the ranger's office a week later when a big car stopped out in front. A distinguished-looking man with iron-gray hair and a pleasant smile got out and came into the office.

"I'm Chester Thatcher, owner and editor of the *Evening Leader*," he announced. "I'm looking for Spruce Renfro."

"You're looking right at him, Mr. Thatcher," Dave Logg said.

THATCHER shook hands with Spruce and Dave. "You must have seen my advertisement," he said. "I've my tough customers all lined up. I selected the toughest and most intelligent from two hundred applicants." He laughed. "Several fights immediately started."

"How many applicants did you have for the bossing job?" Spruce asked.

"I'll never know. The men I selected all showed up to see who their new boss would be. I imagine the applicants for the bossing job took one look at the bunch and changed their minds." Thatcher paused, then said: "I'm offering you the job, Renfro."

"Me? Where did you ever hear of me?"

"Your first guess will be the right one," the editor told him, smiling.

"Dave Logg sent in my name," guessed Spruce.

Thatcher nodded. "He telephoned me. Now, here's the reason for all this. Jefferson R. Jenner, whom you've probably heard of, is my best friend. We've hunted and fished for years. Right now I'm worried about him."

Spruce knew something of Jefferson Jenner. In his younger days, the man had been a great gambler. Occasionally he played poker for big stakes, but mostly his gambling was done with men, against nature. If a man came along who was fighting with his back against the wall, Jenner fought with him. If a stream couldn't be harnessed, or a tract of timber logged, it was a challenge to Jenner to build a dam and log the timber.

"A man hates to see a friend slipping," Thatcher continued. "And Jeff has slipped badly in recent years. I'm inclined to think he has surrounded himself with the wrong men—men who have axes to grind, or are playing safe and thinking of themselves, rather than their employer's health and interests."

"That happens. There're always men who like free rides on a gravy train," said Spruce.

"Jeff and I have hunted ducks a lot, usually in Red Desert which used to be a great breeding and resting country for ducks," Thatcher went on. "Then something happened. Spring dried up and the marshes died off cutting down the nesting area. The smaller the ponds, the greater the increase in alkali. As a result, ducks died by the thou-

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sands. Recently I suggested to Jeff Jenner that he do something about Red Desert. Bring water back; develop small ranches on the fertile soil, and increase nesting areas for the ducks. I thought it would be a fine thing for the desert, small ranches, ducks and Jefferson R. Jenner. Do you know why he turned me down?"

"I imagine, from your advertisement, that he concluded he couldn't get the men," answered Spruce.

"He said the nation was going soft, and that the young fellows didn't care for the tough going any more," Thatcher said. "I decided to prove otherwise, and am ready to spend money to do it. Your job, Renfro, is this: Find out why those springs dried up. Devise means of getting water onto the land. Find out, also, why other outfits attempting to do something with Red Desert were licked. Your CCC training includes water and game conservation. You know how to build dams and ditches. You've had a fight or two in your life. Hop to it. There's two hundred bucks a month in it for you, and a bonus if you make good. Drop in on me as soon as you can and tell me what you need. Another thing, call on Jeff Jenner. He's the man who'll ultimately back the development of Red Desert on a large scale."

WELL," Spruce said to Dave Logg when Thatcher was gone, "he's quite a guy. He never gave me a chance to turn down the job. I like the go-getter type."

"Jefferson Jenner used to be like that," declared Dave. "If the forest service needed any help from Jenner, it got it."

Spruce called at Jenner's office several days later and stated his business to the receptionist.

"Mr. Vance makes all appointments for Mr. Jenner," she told him.

"Then I'd like to see Mr. Vance," Spruce said.

"Mr. Vance is terribly busy," the girl explained. "The management of the Jenner interests is on his shoulders. I'll see."

She disappeared and in a few minutes came out again. "I'm sorry, but Mr. Vance is unusually busy today," she announced.

"I'll wait until he has a spot," said Spruce.

And he waited, cheerfully, though the girl's annoyance increased with the passing hours. He was shown into Vance's office a few minutes before closing time. Les Vance proved to be a shrewd, wolfish-looking man and Spruce guessed he could spot the unusual a long way off. Spruce did his best to avoid telling Vance the nature of his business, but the man said bluntly: "I never permit visitors to see Mr. Jenner unless I know what they want to speak to him about."

Spruce explained briefly what he had in mind. If this move started action against him, he wanted to find it out.

Vance's attitude was smug when Spruce finished speaking. "I'm sure Mr. Jenner will not be interested, Renfro," he said. "He's very old and tired and can hardly be expected to engage in development work."

"I thought the organization would carry the load," Spruce said, taking a shot in the dark. "Irrigated ranches will more than pay the costs of development. The game conservation angle will be incidental, and will naturally please Mr. Jenner. It may prove a by-product which you can present, with almost no cost to yourself, to the government."

Vance showed no signs of relenting and his final refusal was harsh.

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"We'll have no part in any such wild goose proposition," he snapped.

WHEN Spruce Renfro arrived at the *Evening Leader* office to report his interview with Les Vance, Chester Thatcher announced everything was ready—trucks, camping outfit, grub and men. He took Spruce down to a parking lot where the expedition was waiting.

"Boys," he said, "this is Spruce Renfro, your superintendent, or whatever he wants to call himself."

"He looks like a soft touch to me," one man commented.

"The big timber is littered with the bones of those who concluded Spruce was a soft touch," Thatcher retorted. "Just because a man likes to spruce up and look his best is no reason for your believing he's soft in a fight."

"Let's go," Spruce said. "We've got a job to do. There'll be plenty of time to get acquainted in the Red Desert country."

Thatcher gave Spruce maps and typewritten information he had gathered on the region. Spruce studied the maps and information while the trucks rolled steadily toward the nearest mountain pass. There were two ranches in the region. The largest, the Circle B, was on the edge of the desert and was owned by a man named Butch Bland.

In the past, Bland had leased the best parts of the adjoining country for stock grazing. Conveniently located waterholes and springs had made this possible until the hot weather set in. Then Bland had driven the stock, in relays, from hole to hole until the cattle could graze on the irrigated home ranch. With the drying up of the water, the rancher had stopped leasing. At one time the government had offered to sell him the grazing land for five dollars an acre. He had turned down the offer.

Recently, Spruce learned, the government had received an offer of twenty-five cents an acre for the long-dead country. The agent who made the offer said his employer was gambling on making a little money, through grazing leases, during rainy years.

The second outfit, located in the heart of the desert, was called Grady's ranch.

The Bland and Grady ranches raised both horses and cattle, though in recent years the Grady outfit had sold much of its beef cattle.

When camp was made that night, Spruce realized he was in a hostile atmosphere. The men were unfriendly, and made frequent wisecracks. Their glances his way were contemptuous, but Spruce ignored them. Before he brought things to a showdown he wanted to size up his men, and pick a battleground that would give him an even break.

The men obeyed orders after a fashion because Spruce's orders were for their own comfort. They camped the first night without incident and early in the morning of the second day turned onto a road that was little more than a series of deep ruts. Eventually the ruts branched and one set ended up at large white ranchhouse which stood in the shade of tall, leafy trees. There were numerous barns and corrals on the place, and Spruce saw a track designed to train running and harness horses.

"Nice place, but I don't see any cows," one of the men said. He was a big, tough-looking customer and hadn't spoken a word since they started except: "Pass the meat. Pass the spuds. Thanks." Now he

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remarked: "I want a cow ranch, myself sometimes . . . with plenty of cows." It was a tip to the man's ambitions, and Spruce filed it away in his mind for future reference.

"This is a horse ranch, mostly, Bradford," Spruce said. "I'll get down and powwow."

Hard-bitten ranch hands were loafing nearby and Spruce had a hunch they had known he was coming, and were expecting something to happen at his expense.

A SOLIDLY-BUILT man, with a loose lower lip, pitted nose and shrewd black eyes, stalked out to the truck. He had black hair, a red mustache and wore stained, unkempt clothing. From pictures Spruce had seen in connection with horse racing, he recognized the man as Butch Bland. The man bore little resemblance to the William Bland who attended race meets carefully groomed and dressed.

"What do you want?" he growled.

"We're here to make surveys on Red Desert and to try to get water flowing in the springs again," explained Spruce. "We'd like to get our drinking water here."

"Oh, you would, would you?" Bland retorted. "You don't get a drop from us for any such nonsense. Now clear out!"

"I had a hunch a survey is the last thing you want in these parts," Spruce said. It was a shot in the dark, and scored a hit.

"I told you to get out," Bland roared, "and none of your lip." Clenching his fists, he advanced on Spruce, but a bull-necked, broad-shouldered man shoved himself in front of him.

"I'll take care of this dude, boss," he said. "Slick-haired lads are my special dish."

"We're here to do a job," Spruce drawled, "and we hope to keep out of trouble. We like to get along with folks."

"A little fightin' is part of gettin' along with folks in this country," said Bland. He was highly pleased at the turn affairs were taking. It had been months since his men had seen a good fight.

"I just wanted to be set right," Spruce said softly.

"Set him right, Snead," Bland ordered.

Spruce knew he stood alone in this fight. Even his own men didn't care whether or not he was badly beaten. He supposed it served him right for throwing in with what amounted to a haywire outfit, but he would have made the same choice again. Just to keep the record clear, he let Snead strike the first two blows. He didn't want Bland to be able to say that men hired by Thatcher had come to his ranch and made trouble.

Spruce boxed lightly, keeping at a safe distance until he warmed up. As the perspiration flowed and his muscles grew limber, his timing sharpened. Suddenly he changed his tactics, keeping his man off balance and at the same time getting in telling blows. Again and again as Snead retreated to "get set" Spruce closed in, taking blows that would have knocked him cold had his opponent been set.

Spruce worked on Snead's face until the man's guard came up, then whipped in a stomach punch. He had never struck a harder blow. He felt his fist go deep, then bounce back. Snead was paralyzed for the moment. He struck the ground so hard his feet flew into the air. An odd expression filled his eyes as he tried to get up and his muscles refused to respond.

"O. K.," Spruce said after a glance

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at Snead. "Let's go." He wanted to get under way before the Circle B outfit recovered from its surprise. A free for all was certain once Bland's men realized what had happened and Spruce wasn't ready for that yet.

AS the trucks rumbled down the road, Spruce chuckled to himself. He had cashed in on the situation in more ways than one. By licking Snead he had probably saved himself the trouble of taking on Sam Bradford and several others. He drew a folded handkerchief from his pocket, carefully wiped the sweat from his face and then combed his hair.

"Where do we go from here?" asked the driver when they were clear of Bland's property.

"Try the Grady ranch," Spruce answered. "We've got to find a base from which to work. . . . a base with good water."

The Bland ranch bordered the westerly edge of the desert. The Grady outfit, ten miles distant by a winding road, was in the desert proper. Stretching easterly from Grady's were hundreds of square miles of arid land and dried-up waterholes.

Nothing was said for quite a while, then Sam Bradford suddenly thrust his hand toward Spruce. "Feel like shakin' it?" he asked.

Spruce grinned. "I don't see why not," he said warmly.

"It ain't every man that'll shake hands with a heel," declared Sam. "Instead of us bein' loyal to you, like we should have been, we all hoped you'd get your head knocked off back there."

"I knew it," Spruce grinned, "but I was sure you'd prove yourselves to be right guys in the long run."

"Just what is there in this for you?" Sam asked. His early life had been spent on the pavements where the dog-eat-dog theory prevailed. It was hard for him to understand an attitude untouched by self-interest.

"I get my pay every month," Spruce explained, "but the real idea is to make this desert bloom. In the back of Thatcher's mind is the hope that Jefferson R. Jenner will throw his money behind the deal and develop it in a way so that you fellows who want to can get yourselves small ranches. If it works out right, then Jenner might take on Dismal Mesa. That would be a whale of a job, but it would give small ranches to thousands of people."

"Most of us answered Thatcher's ad because any man who figgered he was tough couldn't pass it up," Sam said. "Besides it offered pay and three squares a day. But I guess all of us were thinking: 'Maybe this is the break I've been lookin' for.'"

"With luck," Spruce predicted, "that's the way it'll turn out."

CHAPTER II

SHOTGUN WELCOME

ON Spruce's map the Grady ranch was designated by a green area, but as the trucks neared the remote spread, he saw that it was burned brown, except for two acres of alfalfa west of the house. The brush about the ranch was alive with rabbits and the ridges near the brush were thick with coyotes preying on the rabbits. Hundreds of birds filled the trees around the house.

When the lead truck reached the gate, a girl, flanked by two elderly bowlegged cowpunchers, blocked the way. The girl carried an old-fash-

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ioned ten-gauge shotgun whose hammers were back and ready for business.

"Clear out," she ordered in a calm voice, "or we'll open fire."

"She don't look like a girl you could lick," Sam Bradford whispered to Spruce. "Maybe you can talk your way past her."

Spruce jumped down and walked over to the fence. "You must be Marion Grady," he said. "I'm Spruce Renfro, and I'm not here to start trouble. Chester Thatcher, the editor of the *Evening Leader*, is backing an investigation to determine why the springs have dried up. If we learn the reason, then we hope Jefferson R. Jenner will spend money to bring the water back."

"I can save you all that expense and trouble," the girl said promptly.

"Blow out the dam the Desert Development Co. built at the head waters of Red Desert River and our water will come back."

Spruce had already checked on the dam. Its waters were carried through a ridge by tunnel, then by ditch to a fertile area.

"For miles the river bed is *below* the bottoms of your wells and springs," he said, "so the dam makes no difference. Water couldn't possibly seep from the river bed into your wells."

"Now I'll tell you something, Mr. Renfro," Marion said. Her quiet manner commanded attention and respect and impressed Spruce. "Normally, Red Desert River flows both above and below ground. Some of the water higher up was diverted by underground channels, giving us our artesian wells, and supplying the desert springs."

"Engineers hold otherwise," countered Spruce.

"Oh, darn the engineers!" she exclaimed. "They live with their heads in clouds and their noses in columns of figures. When the river was dammed our wells gradually stopped flowing. We put in pumps, but that helped for only a short time. Hundreds of acres burned down to the roots. Rabbits and birds by the thousands concentrated on our ranch. Hundreds of ducks were dying from alkali water and I revived them on flooded alfalfa patches. We've shipped all our horses out except for a saddle string. Now we're drilling a deep well and finding dry dirt. Why should I have any faith in what you are up to?"

"We wanted to use your ranch as a base of operations," Spruce told her. "But I guess both the Bland and Grady outfits are against us."

"Oh! You stopped at Bland's? What happened?"

"Spruce dusted off an hombre named Snead," Sam Bradford said, joining Spruce.

"You beat Snead?" Marion's eyes grew bright with interest and her manner thawed slightly. "Why, he's supposed to be good."

"He couldn't get going," Spruce said. "Besides, I learned to box in the CCC." He hesitated, then took the plunge. "Will you let us camp here tonight? We'd like your help, but if we can't have it, we'll get along alone. That means hauling water long distances and handicapping the operation."

"Yes," Marion said, "you may camp here tonight. But go light on the water. We're pumping almost nothing. Two days ago I had to stop irrigating the last patch of alfalfa."

WHILE the others made camp, Spruce sat on the vine-covered porch talking to Marion Grady. He learned that she represented the third generation of Gradys to oc-

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cupy the desert ranch. Because of the high altitude and the bracing air, racing stock thrived. Grady horses had attracted nationwide attention. They had beaten Circle B horses constantly and Bland had bought a great tract of land on the edge of the desert and shipped his own stock into the country.

He had tried to buy the Grady ranch, and, failing, had declared war on the little spread. He had, without warning, leased the desert range around the Grady ranch, including the waterholes, and this had forced Marion's father, who was then in charge, to ship much of his stock to other ranges.

Grady had fought back for ten years; then his health had cracked and the doctor had ordered him to a sea level climate.

Plenty of dead cowpunchers must have turned over in their boothill graves as Squint shook out a loop large enough for an elephant and flipped it over the cow's head.

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"And since dad left three years ago, I have been running things, and lying like a pirate," the girl concluded.

"Lying like a pirate?" queried Spruce.

"Making dad believe everything is lovely," she explained. "And hoping things might change. The change has all been to the bad."

"You must've taken over as a kid," Spruce said.

"I was seventeen," Marion told him. "But I had been raised here, and the practical side of horse breeding wasn't hard. The dam stopping the flow of Red Desert River is what upset the apple cart."

"I'm sure," Spruce said, "the dam has nothing to do with the situation. After all, Red Desert River was only emptying into a desert sink, covered with soda and salt flats. Now it's irrigating a new region."

"I can't accept that theory," she said wearily, and Spruce realized she was a very tired girl. "But . . . I'm always open to conviction."

THE well was allowed to fill each night; then early the following morning the water was pumped into the main tank. Marion had some reserve in other tanks which she was hoarding against the day when the deepest well dried up. Nearby, a gang of men were desperately driving a deep well. So far they had brought up nothing but dry dirt and sand.

Spruce learned from the ancient cowboys that if they didn't strike water in the new well, Marion Grady would pack up, walk off and leave the ranch to the buzzards. With water, the spread was worth nearly seventy thousand dollars. Without it, it wasn't worth ten cents.

They filled canteens early the following morning and the trucks set off in different directions. Each group of men had instructions to scatter

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and make a survey of the region Spruce had designated on maps. They were to proceed as far as the trucks could travel, then continue on foot.

Spruce selected Sam Bradford and the latter's partner, Squint Tremper, a dried-up, swarthy fellow with shrewd black eyes. Tremper would not have weighed more than ninety pounds sopping wet, and his clothes fitted him like a tent. Squint had nicknamed his big sidekick Skimmed-milk Sam.

Spruce drove the truck and Sam shared the driver's seat with him. Squint made himself as comfortable as possible in the back.

Spruce drove toward a spot marked Quail Springs, reputed to be alive with quail in the dense thickets and nearby draws. About seven miles from the Grady ranch the road dwindled to land occasionally scarred by a wheel rut for a few yards.

"Sam," Spruce asked, "how did you happen to head West? You talk like a man raised on the pavements."

"I was raised on the pavements, and I was an orphan at that," Sam answered. "I didn't know there were better things in life until I was big enough to sneak away from my district and peek into rich folks' windows. That started me thinkin', specially when I saw the kind of milk they drunk. I supposed milk was watery and bluish. The little bit I got to drink was."

"I've found that kind myself," Spruce admitted.

"One day a guy that was half lit bought a newspaper from me. You know how a genial souse can get an idea. Well, he decided to buy me a feed in the swellest hotel in town . . . the kind where waiters swarm around you. The hotel people didn't like it, but this souse was a big shot and he told 'em they'd like it, or else. He ordered for me . . . oysters, planked steak, French fried potatoes and things like that. But it was the milk that I liked." Sam shook his head ruefully. "My stomach wasn't used to that kid of food. I was sicker'n a dog all night."

"Tough," Spruce said.

"I made up my mind if I couldn't get the kind of milk I liked in the city, I'd go West where it came from. In the movies I'd seen thousands of cows, so I headed out this way. But it took me a long time to get here. Then I sort o' jumped clean over the cattle country and landed on Puget Sound water fronts. Plenty of small dairy ranches there, but they weren't like those I'd seen in the movies. That's what I was lookin' for."

Spruce understood. As a boy, Sam had formed certain definite ideas of what he wanted. No substitutes would satisfy him, and even now he was looking for the real thing, though common sense told him the odds were against finding it.

SPRUCE stopped the truck on the brink of Red Desert River. The bridge was rotten and unsafe. The canyon was strewn with boulders and there wasn't a chance of crossing.

"End of the line," he announced. "Everybody out."

They slung canteens over their shoulders and Sam led off at a brisk pace.

"Hold it down," Spruce ordered. "You're used to sea-level atmosphere. You'll get winded if you aren't careful. Besides, it's hot."

Even at the slower pace they felt the altitude. After a while Spruce

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squatted down in the shade of a butte that looked as if it hadn't cooled since volcanic fire blasted the land. With the aid of binoculars he could see a considerable distance. There was death on every hand—lines of dead trees along the old river bed, clumps of dead trees and brush where water had once flowed from the ground.

"Trees sure grew in queer places," Skimmed-milk Sam said. "Now why should they grow there, there and there?" He pointed to three clumps, each about a mile apart.

"I'll tell you why," Spruce answered. "The underground stream that once fed the waterholes almost reached the surface at those points, and the roots of brush and small trees grew down to moist earth."

Climbing the butte, Spruce studied additional country through the binoculars. Then he yelled down at Sam: "Bring up the large map. It's in my pack."

Sam came up several minutes later, puffing heavily from his efforts. "I'd sure like a drink of cold milk right now," he said.

"Maybe we can promote one at the Grady ranch," Spruce suggested, spreading out the map.

"No," Sam replied. "You can't. I checked. Ain't a cow on the place. Otherwise, it's a nice ranch. And that Marion Grady! Boy, I didn't know there was girls like that in the world. Of course, they ain't for the likes of me."

"Why not?" Spruce demanded. "Get that idea out of your head. Anything is good enough for you, if you deserve it." He turned his attention to the map again. On the marked waterholes he set down additional crosses as he located points where water had formerly neared the surface. Of course, each mark he made was approximate. When he had finished, he traced a line from mark to mark. He whistled softly. The line resembled the meanderings of a surface stream.

"Boy! Oh, boy!" he exclaimed. "Maybe I've stumbled onto the answer to the water shortage right offn the bat. If I have, I'm sitting pretty. If not, I'm going to make a prize fool of myself."

He worked down from the butte and continued the trek toward Quail Springs. Clearing the last low ridge, he dropped down to the thicket surrounding the waterhole. Only the hardy desert brush was alive. Quail huddled in groups on the ground, wings partly spread, panting from the heat and thirst. The area was littered with bleached bones. A dozen buzzards flapped their wings and got awkwardly into the air, where they wheeled monotonously, informing the world that death lay below them.

"Bird bones, rabbit bones, coyote bones," said Squint. "Ain't a drop of water in the hole." The mud about the hole had baked hard, then cracked into segments. "Why don't they fly away?"

"Partly because the type of bird here doesn't fly far," Spruce explained. "Partly because they don't know where to go." He dented the crown of his hat and filled it with water from the canteen. Before he had stopped pouring birds were fluttering about, some drinking from the water as it came from the canteen. The other two men followed Spruce's example and presently three groups of birds were drinking.

"You two go back to the truck," Spruce ordered. "Bring all the water we left there. I'll stay here and dig." He pointed to a rusty shovel cached in a mesquite tree and used by desert prospectors to clear the hole of muck. It was a short-han-

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dled implement, common to the outfit of miners who packed in, a back breaker, but effective.

Stripping off his shirt, Spruce began digging. He went down three feet before he found moist sand, then this began sliding in almost as fast as he dug it out. To retard the sliding, he broke off dead trees, drove them down with rocks, and made cribbing of a sort, then continued digging. He used the last of his water and a half-hour later realized night was at hand and the others hadn't returned. Climbing the highest point, he gazed over the desert. There wasn't anyone in sight. He shook his head dubiously.

"If they're lost, they're in a jam," he mused. "And . . . so am I."

CHAPTER III

RATTLESNAKE SPRINGS

SPRUCE divided his remaining food, eating half and saving the remainder for the following morning. He was between the devil and the deep sea. He couldn't leave without water, and on the other hand he felt he should do something about Sam Bradford and Squint Tremper. He put in a night of fitful sleeping, awakened at daybreak and looked into the waterhole.

The bottom was filled with birds, picking at the ooze that had formed during the night. Spruce wondered how long it would be before he thought in terms of eating birds to get what moisture their bodies contained.

"Not yet awhile," he decided, "though my mouth's so dry I could spit cotton."

He climbed the nearest ridge hoping to see Sam and Squint, but nothing was moving on the desert. He was about to return to the shade of the brush when he saw a spiral of dust lifting from the desert floor. He watched and presently two horsemen, who had been riding in a low spot, appeared. Their figures shimmered briefly in a mirage that took the form of a lake.

"Mirage!" Spruce muttered, then his concern took a new turn. If the lost men saw such a mirage they would mistake it for water.

Spruce centered his attention on the two riders. Obviously they were headed for Quail Springs. "They'll give me a drink," he reflected, "and help me out of this. Or will they? The only riders in these parts are from the Grady or Bland ranches, and Marion shipped most of her buckaroos out."

Spruce crawled into the deepest thicket to await results. A half-hour passed before the men appeared.

The leading rider was Snead. He showed few marks of the battle, because Spruce had delivered his hardest blows to the man's stomach. The other rider was lean and dark and somehow reminded Spruce of a dagger. He rode a tough mustang and gave the impression that he and his mount would outlast most any other man-horse combination the country could produce.

Snead dismounted, left his horse standing, and approached the well Spruce had dug.

"The rats have commenced their work," he commented, "but they didn't get far."

"That's what Bland wanted to know," the other said. He made notes in a book. "We don't want to underestimate those jaspers."

"You're right, Blackie, Snead agreed. "But we ain't doin' so bad. Put one truck out of business, and made buzzard bait out of two of the crew. I wished one of 'em had been Renfro. I'll never rest until I square

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my account with him."

"Renfro thinks fast, Snead," Blackie said. "He proved that by gettin' his men off Circle B range before we could get organized. Say, what's the matter with you?"

"Take a look here," Snead said quickly. "Here're the tracks of *three* men. We accounted for only two. That means—"

The moment Snead began studying the three sets of footprints, Spruce had began to work his way quietly toward the man's horse. Now he broke from cover, leaped into the saddle and drove his heels into the animal's flanks. The horse jumped and was off. As Spruce went by Blackie's horse he gave it a kick in the flank. It bolted, and the two Circle B men were left stranded.

Spruce crouched low, hoping to avoid the bullets he knew would come. He forced the horse into a zigzag course while lead kicked up the sand around him. A few seconds later he was beyond effective revolver shot. His first act was to look in the saddlebags for a canteen and take a drink of water.

"And now," he said, "to pick up the boys' trail."

SPRUCE rode directly to the spot where he had left the truck. It was a mass of burned and twisted steel. The gasoline tank had exploded and the tires were burned to ashes. He examined the surrounding dirt and found some tracks. They led toward the Grady ranch for a while, then something had diverted them toward a stretch of badlands. Spruce hesitated, conscious of a strong impulse to follow the trail.

Common sense advised getting help, particularly as both he and his horse would need more water than the canteens contained. He rode to the nearest ridge, gathered brush and built a fire. A half-hour later he caught the flash of a windshield as a truck came over the desert.

To the south, Spruce saw a thin column of smoke lifting slowly on the still, desert air. He kept his fire going until the truck stopped some two miles distant. Practically the entire outfit jumped down from the truck and came toward him. Watching them through binoculars, Spruce saw that they were loaded with a stretcher, numerous canteens and several packs of food.

"Give this horse a little water," he directed when they arrived. "Then I'll see if I can reach Sam and Squint. You follow."

The horse was in good shape and Spruce pressed it. Buzzards had now marked the spot and were wheeling high above the smoke column. Spruce found Squint muttering through a swollen tongue, and Sam on the ground, lashed with strips of torn clothing. Spruce soaked a clean handkerchief and gave it to Squint to suck, then forced a small quantity of water into Sam's mouth. A few minutes later Squint was pleading for more.

"You've got to take this easy," Spruce warned, "or you'll kick the bucket."

As soon as the others came up, Spruce ordered Sam placed in the saddle and lashed. The big fellow was partially out of his head. Squint got onto the stretcher, and the entire body of men, nineteen in all, slowly returned to the truck.

"What about this Circle B horse?" one of the boys asked.

"We should let Snead and Blackie stew in their own juice," Spruce answered, "but we can't let them get a thing on us. If we make one little slip we'll be facing court charges. So back goes this horse." He watered the horse again, refilled the

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canteens and put them back in the saddlebags, then started the horse toward Quail Spring. The animal was sure to make its way instinctively to the water.

Spruce was in thoughtful mood as the truck jolted its way back to the Grady ranch. He had lost a truck, and nearly lost two good men. He had received a hint that might lead to the reason for the dry holes, and he had learned this was to be a battle in which no quarter would be given.

"Maybe what I've learned in this short time," he reflected, "is worth the price of the truck. And that isn't going to be charged up to Thatcher, either. Bland's going to pay for his fun."

MARION GRADY took charge of Sam and Squint and had them put to bed.

"You should take things easy, too," she told Spruce. He shook his head, explaining that he had too much to do.

The following morning Spruce and the others tackled a new survey. Spruce had made duplicate maps on the area he planned to survey.

"Now these marks indicate former waterholes, or spots where things grew because water was close to the surface," he told the men. "I'm connecting them up with a blue line. You'll notice we have something that looks like a river . . . but a river that always flowed under the surface. We'll begin at the lower waterhole and gradually work upstream. The truck crew's job is to follow the blue line as nearly as possible, and cache water at the points I indicate. The rest of us will go from hole to hole and make checks."

"Where does it take us?" a driver asked.

"Almost to the border of the Circle B Ranch," answered Spruce. "Remember this: We aren't to cross the boundary at any time. It's fenced, so if you keep clear of barbed wire you'll be safe." He detailed three men to act as truck crew and gave them a copy of the map. "If anybody gets in a jam," he concluded, "build a fire and stay there. We'll get to you somehow. But I don't want men to split up unless something forces it."

The truck dropped Spruce and thirteen men near one of the holes. It lumbered away and they didn't see it again for nearly a week. But they found food and water at the designated caches. Spruce's trek ended at an abandoned mine just over the Bland barbed wire. A Circle B rider was guarding the property. On one of two wooden buildings was a sign, reading:

RED DESERT GOLD MINING CORPORATION

The guard seemed friendly enough, but this did not deceive Spruce. He knew the fellow had received orders to disarm them, if possible, and to learn what he could of their plans. Seemingly Spruce fell in with the idea.

"This waterhole, Granite Springs, must've been quite a spot in its time," he said, indicating a dry hole and a considerable clump of dead brush and trees on the desert side of the barbed wire.

"Yeah, she was," the guard admitted. "It gave the minin' company all the water they needed until it dried up. Then they had to haul water from the ranch."

"Did they strike any gold?"

"Nope," the man admitted. "Just some color in spots. It was a right promisin' mine at the start."

"The stockholders are holdin' the

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sack, eh?" suggested Spruce.

"They ain't given up hope yet," the fellow said. "They'll raise more money and sink their shaft deeper."

"It's on Circle B property, isn't it?"

"Yeah. The boss has some kind of a leasin' arrangement." Then the man decided it was time he asked a few questions himself. "How do you jaspers expect to find water where there ain't none?"

"We don't," Spruce replied. "We expect to give the water a chance to reach the surface again. Something stopped or diverted it. An earthquake, maybe. Chances are it's trying to get to the surface in other places. And it will get there . . . in time. You can't stop water forever. It'll break through."

"It's costin' a pile of money," the guard pointed out.

"But Thatcher will get it back in leasing fees or outright sales of the Red Desert range as small ranches," Spruce declared. "Well, I guess I'd better get back to the Grady ranch and make my report." His eyes were on the mine dump as he talked. It seemed to him they hadn't taken out enough dirt to determine whether they had a paying mine or not. They couldn't have had much money behind them.

From the mine dump Spruce's eyes shifted to the makeshift road beyond. With Bland's permission the truck could have used that road and picked them up. But they didn't have Bland's permission—and that meant a five-mile hike to the truck.

The guard asked several more questions, then waved them a casual farewell. The party plodded slowly over the desert, dropping into a low area, then climbing a gentle ridge that gave them a better view of portions of the Circle B not visible from the ranchhouse itself. In viewing this new area, Spruce realized Bland was prospering. Pumping plants were supplying water to newly planted alfalfa.

When they dropped into the next low spot, Spruce stopped. "I'm staying here," he announced. "You fellows go on. Keep bunched up, just in case the guard is counting us. I'll meet you at the truck sometime before daylight."

"Just a minute, Spruce," one of the men protested. "You've preached to us the idea of two or more men stickin' together. Now you're off on a lone hand game. It don't make sense. One of us stays . . . in case."

"O. K., Joe," Spruce agreed.

SPRUCE and Joe lay sprawled in the brush, watching the mine. At dusk the guard got into the saddle and rode toward the ranch. No one had relieved him, so evidently the man had been placed there only while Spruce and his men were in the vicinity.

"Come on, Joe," Spruce said. "We'll have a look." He led the way to the mine.

They climbed the fence, made a quick search of the buildings, and found a coil of rope in the loft of the largest building. A windlass had been left in position over the shaft. Spruce attached the rope and Joe lowered him into the darkness. About fifty feet down Spruce's feet struck bottom.

"Hey!" he bellowed. "Haul me up, quick. Keep that rope tight." When Joe was slow in obeying, Spruce roared: "Damn it, man, wake up! Take up the slack in the rope. Slow now. O. K., now pull! Pull harder! Harder!"

The rope tightened and the windlass creaked and groaned. Slowly Spruce was drawn to the surface.

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"What happened?" Joe asked. "You had me scared."

"*You* were scared?" Spruce exploded. "I was scared stiff! When I hit I went knee-deep into muck before I could yell. And I was almost shoulder-deep before you pulled hard enough to lift me. Now wait! Get a plank for me to stand on. We don't want to drop muck all over the place and let 'em know we've been here."

Standing on the plank, Spruce removed his outer clothing, rolled it into a bundle, scraped the muck from his boots and put them on again. Then he walked to the barbed wire fence and climbed over it, leaving Joe to remove the rope from the windlass and return it to the loft.

Some distance from the fence, Spruce dressed. He was ready when Joe joined him.

"And thanks, Joe, for insisting on staying with me," he said. "If I'd tackled it alone I'd have been there yet. Another thing: Don't talk about this evening's work to anyone. Some of the fellows might forget and make a thoughtless reference to the matter. We'll just say I went down the shaft and didn't find anything."

"It looks as if they'd filled in to cover up some vein they had found," Joe suggested. "I've heard that's one way of foolin' the stockholders, forcin' the price down, so the insiders can buy up the stock for a song."

"Yeah. It's an old trick, but it often works," Spruce agreed.

They walked slowly to avoid running into brush and rocky areas. Spruce's clothing dried out shortly before they reached the truck. He beat and shook off the muck and dust. When he joined the others in the darkness no visible evidence of the experience remained. At camp he shifted to a clean outfit, then walked over to the ranchhouse to find out how Sam and Squint were getting along. He didn't need to ask. He could hear. Marion was playing the piano. Sam was singing a good barber-shop bass, and Squint was going to town in a horrible tenor.

"A hundred percent recovery," Spruce observed, joining the group.

"We're swell," Sam said. "Boy! I sure like this ranch life."

Spruce had an idea Marion comprised for about ninety percent of Sam's enthusiasm for ranch life. "What about cows?" he asked.

"I'm a patient guy," Sam replied. "I'll get my fresh milk yet."

"What happened to you on the desert?"

"We reached the truck and found it just hot iron and embers," Sam replied. "A couple of Circle B riders loomed up on the ridge ahead. One of 'em cut loose with a six-gun and we took the hint and headed for the badlands. We figgered to sneak back that night and hit for the ranch. Got into the badlands and in no time we were all turned around."

"We saw a couple of lakes," Squint took up the narrative. "But we'd read about mirage in books and they didn't fool us none. We saw your fire the next day, and I managed to build one. You know the rest."

"Oh, no, they don't," Sam growled. "I went off my nut from thirst and heat, and Squint had to tie me up."

"Big men suffer more from thirst than the dried-up kind," Squint insisted generously. "That's why he cracked before I did."

"That's true," Marion agreed. "Big men, the solidly built kind, need more water."

"Well, you're both in pretty good shape," Spruce said. "I've been working the others hard. We'll rent two horses from Miss Grady and you two ride to Rattlesnake Springs, and

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return with complete information. By that time I'll have most of my notes on the other waterholes made up. A complete report can go in by Sunday. Then we'll wait for orders."

Spruce was tempted to make the Rattlesnake Springs trip himself. Supposedly, it was the lowest of the old waterholes, and the end of the underground stream. Here, if any place, Spruce reasoned there might be water.

"How do you feel about things now?" asked Marion. "Do you still believe damming the Red Desert River didn't stop water flowing in the waterholes?"

"Yes," Spruce answered. "I'm more sure of it than ever. The waterholes are too far from the river. The ground lies wrong. The waterholes were fed by an underground stream."

SAM and Squint had ridden horses exactly three times—on the Grady ranch. Fortunately the horses Marion loaned them were quiet old cow ponies that had seen their best days. The fires of youth no longer made them buck in the morning. They took everything in stride.

It was a seven-hour, easy ride to Rattlesnake Springs. The waterhole lay at the foot of a butte, and while it wasn't visible until a rider got close, it was impossible to become lost.

"Ride toward the butte," Spruce had said, "and you'll get there. Then ride toward that table mountain and you'll eventually spot the Grady ranch. If you can't do that, the horses will bring you home."

They came upon the springs suddenly—some fifty acres of marsh, higher ground covered with trees and grass, and what would be an acre of shallow water in normal times. The water had dwindled to a muddy patch, crowded with birds. A mallard hen that had nested there for several years had brought off her brood, but it was doubtful if the ducklings knew anything of swimming. They were a thin lot.

"We'll have to fence that off to give the water a chance to settle," Sam said. "Say, do you see what I see. Right over in that mesquite. A wild cow and her calf."

"So what?" asked Squint indifferently.

"Milk, you loco half pint!" Sam exclaimed. "Real cow milk, right from headquarters, and no chance to thin it out."

"How you goin' to get it?"

"Why, catch the cow . . . and milk her," Sam said.

"What're you going to put the milk in?" Squint was a practical young fellow at times.

"Canteen. Just take the top off the canteen, shoot the milk through the openin', let it cool off and drink it." Sam answered.

"What's the wild cow goin' to be doin' all this time?" asked Squint skeptically.

Sam shrugged his shoulders to indicate that the query was silly. "Cows was born to be milked," he said. "They expect it. Unless they're milked reg'lar, they don't feel so good."

"Who milks the wild cows on the range?"

"Always askin' fool questions," Sam complained. "Say! I never thought of that. Who does milk the wild cows when their calves get all they want?"

The two put in several hours fencing the waterhole with limbs and small dead trees, then turned in. They were up again at daylight and Sam took charge.

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"The first order of business is to milk that cow," he said. "They milk cows at daybreak. That's why the milkman comes at such early hours."

"How you goin' to catch her?"

"Rope her," Sam declared. "Us kids saw how they done it in a movie and we used to rope each other." They saddled the horses and Sam shook out the lariat. "You stand ready to lend a hand, Squint. I don't know what I'll ask you to do, but I've a hunch it'll have to be done quick."

As Squint neared the cow, his horse took charge. Whether he lacked confidence in his rider or merely obeyed his early training will never be known. As the cow and her bawling calf began to move, the horse came alongside. Sam's loop was large enough for an elephant. He heaved it out and by a miracle it fell over the cow's head without slipping back to her middle. Thousands of dead cowpunchers must have turned in their graves and moaned at that bit of roping.

As the rope settled, Sam gave it three flips and it dropped at the right angle under the cow's hind quarters. The horse did the rest and the cow struck the ground with a grunt. Sam jumped from the saddle. The horse backed slowly, keeping the line tight and giving the cow no chance to get to her feet.

Sam rushed up, sat down on the cow's hind legs, then yelled for Squint. "Hold her head down," he ordered. "She may horn me while I'm tryin' to find a spigot. Here it is!" He squeezed and a thin stream of milk missed the canteen opening by three inches. He tried again and got nothing. "This one's empty! I'll try another. Quick! Grab her horns."

SQUINT was ten feet from the cow when the calf took a hand in things. Its hard head caught the little man in the ribs and knocked him cold. As the next stream missed the canteen opening, Sam, in desperation, tossed the canteen aside and held his hat.

"Can't miss an openin' like that," he panted. "Hey, Squint. You all right?" It was evident Sam didn't want to relinquish his advantage. Squint didn't answer, and Sam continued his desperate milking. He had just about moistened the inside of the hat when the rope slackened and the cow got to her feet with a mighty heave.

Sam ran. Just as the cow was on the point of tossing him, the rope pulled up. The cow staggered, then the rope broke close to her neck and she was free. She got to her feet, caught Sam cleanly and knocked him through the waterhole fence. She turned to finish off Squint, but the little man had got to his feet and dived into the brush.

"How much milk did you get, Sam?" Squint asked as the cow and her calf loped away.

"There's a witch's curse on me," groaned Sam. "The calf must have beat me to it. There wasn't an ounce in all four spigots."

"I guess we belong in town," Squint said mournfully. "where milk comes in bottles."

"Not me," Sam declared stoutly. "I'm stayin' on the range until I own a cow that I can milk." He got slowly to his feet, aching in every bone. "Some men go to the south pole; some men collect butterflies; some men are high divers, and others collect paintings. I'm a practical man. I go for milk."

"It'll make a sissy out of you," Squint argued. "Let's get some other hobby."

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"Brushin' his hair didn't make a sissy out of Spruce Renfro, so swiggin' milk won't make a sissy out of me," Sam insisted. "Plenty of milk, thick steaks broiled rare, lots of vegetables and I'll take on anybody."

CHAPTER IV

SPRUCE STAKES A CLAIM

SPRUCE RENFRO had nearly completed his report and was thinking of sending a searching party for Sam and Squint when they arrived.

"What happened to you?" he asked, after a look at their battered features and torn clothing.

"Sam is the kind of a man things happen to," Squint answered. "I'm goin' to quit goin' around with him. He tried to milk a wild cow."

"Go ahead and laugh," growled Sam. "And now that that's over with, here's your report on Rattlesnake Springs."

"Thanks," Spruce said. "It's all I needed." He included the report with his own got ready to drive the lightest truck to the nearest railroad station. "You fellows rest up," he directed, when he was giving his final instructions. "Give Miss Grady a hand if she needs it. I'm delivering the reports to Thatcher in person."

"Will you mail a letter for me?" Marion asked. "I'm answering a routine call the government sent for bids on Red Desert land."

"Are you a gambler?"

"My father is," she answered. "I fight the impulse. Dad isn't the card-gambling type, though he loves poker. But he'll stake everything he's got on raising horses on a damp spot in the desert."

"That's the kind of gambling I have in mind," Spruce explained. "Thatcher is buying a chunk of Red Desert. If we bring water back, he'll sell it for enough to pay all costs. That leaves a considerable area. Some of my outfit are planning to pick up tracts. I'd like to see you buy the rest."

"I can't borrow another dime on the ranch, Marion answered regretfully. "I might sell or mortgage our horses, but I want to keep them free for dad."

"You wouldn't be taking much of a gamble," Spruce said thoughtfully. "I'd like to promise as much water as it ever had, but something *could* happen to knock out everything. One thing is certain, though: If you don't grab the land, Bland will."

"If I could just wait and see," she suggested.

"Bland is watching, too," Spruce told her. "The instant dry holes start flowing, he'll move fast. You may find Bland's stock-raising empire on all sides."

"You tempt me to take a chance," she said. "Why should you want to do this for us?"

"That isn't a hard question," Spruce replied. "One answer is, you're helping us. Another is, Bland's fighting you and using dirty tactics. The third answer, I'll save. And it's one that may have to stand up in court."

Marion took back the letter she had given him to mail. "I'll sleep on this proposition," she decided.

Spruce left an hour later, driving to the mine with lights out. He found it deserted, and risked a small flashlight which he kept shaded and with beam pointed to the ground.

"Here's where Spruce Renfro stakes himself a mining claim bang up against Bland's property," he said. "All of which will look as if I'm making myself a little dough at Thatcher's expense."

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HE put up monuments to mark the corners of the claim, and was careful to include the waterhole. In each monument he left the regulation location notice which informed all of the world that he had staked the ground and would carry on mining operations. He kept the monuments low, hoping they would not attract too much attention. He spent the remainder of the night driving to town, ate breakfast and was waiting when the recorder opened his office.

"Mining claim, huh?" the recorder said. "That's the country Bland prospected. He found hungry ground." He gave Spruce a searching look. "Struck anything?"

"Maybe I'll strike something," Spruce answered. "You can never tell what you'll find when you start digging."

The recorder grinned and asked no more questions. A half-hour later Spruce caught the train. He slept most of the way to the city and, getting off the train, headed for the *Evening Leader's* offices.

Thatcher greeted him with enthusiasm. "How's the haywire outfit?" he asked.

"Fine," answered Spruce.

"I hear you polished off a Bland man," said Thatcher.

"Yes. He was slow on the hoof and I got in a lucky punch or two," Spruce answered. "It impressed the boys and saved me battling them later on. I'm gradually building up enthusiasm among them for the desert project. They hope it'll come out O. K. Some want to settle there, if we get water. Others like the idea of developing Dismal Mesa where they can ranch on a larger scale."

"Dismal Mesa, Spruce, is beyond my depth," Thatcher answered. "Jefferson Jenner will have to swing that one.

"Right now we need money for powder and cement so that we can blast, build concrete troughs which will stop the cattle from stamping in the mud and spoiling the water," Spruce told the editor.

"I'll call Jeff Jenner and tell him I'm sending you over."

"Won't it pack more weight with him if I reach him on my own efforts?" Spruce asked.

"It will," admitted Thatcher. "But you can't get by his man, Vance."

"How about calling at his club?"

"Did you ever try getting by a club doorman?"

"No. But I've a scheme. Here are a couple of pictures that I took. They should open the door." Spruce handed Thatcher the pictures and the publisher glanced briefly, then whistled.

THE doorman at Jenner's club had a slit of a mouth, and his eyes were melting ice when occasion demanded. Spruce gave him the envelope containing the photographs and said: "Will you please hand this to Mr. Jenner and tell him Mr. Renfro is waiting outside?"

"Step inside," the doorman answered, indicating a lobby. He disappeared and returned several minutes later. "Mr. Jenner will see you," he said. He led the way to a small room with radio, numerous books and several comfortable chairs.

Jefferson R. Jenner was a frail man, with thoughtful blue eyes and a tired face. His skin was pale and unhealthy. He studied Spruce for a long time.

"I used to be bronzed and strong like you," he said finally. "I hope you realize you are richer, at this very moment, than I am?"

The observation almost caught

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Spruce offguard. "I guess I'm lucky to be young and healthy," he admitted.

Again there was a long, intent study, then Jenner looked at the photographs. "You sent me these pictures of the skeletons of hundreds of ducks," he said. "Why?"

"Because," Spruce answered frankly. "I wanted to talk to you personally, and I happened to hear you were a great duck hunter in your early days, and hunters believe in game conservation."

"I shot my share," Jenner admitted. "I'm interested in anything that will keep our wild life rotating. It's senseless and wasteful to let them die from poison water. What have you in mind?"

Spruce outlined his Red Desert plan. "I'm not asking you to make a move one way or another, now," he concluded. "But if we are successful in water conservation there, then I'd like to see you get behind a much bigger proposition . . . Dismal Mesa. It'll take plenty of money, good men and patience, but Dismal Mesa can produce grain, fruit crops and plenty of game . . . quail, ducks and maybe partridges. You have the money and the patience, and the men are ready."

"What do you want out of it?"

"Nothing, but a straw boss' pay," Spruce answered. "I've been with the CCC and have developed a game-conservation slant on life, as well as the urge to see water flow on fertile land."

"Thatcher has a hand in this, hasn't he?" Jenner smiled faintly. "I read his advertisement for men. In my younger days, I'd have published such an ad." He chuckled. "Maybe Thatcher stole the idea from me. He's got a long memory."

"Mr. Thatcher has helped a great deal so far," Spruce said.

"Go ahead with your plans, Renfro," Jenner directed, "and I'll ask one of my men, Les Vance, to make a careful check on your progress. I'll want photographs, detailed reports, and so on. If you're successful, I'll look into the Dismal Mesa proposition. And thank you for bringing this to my attention."

Spruce knew this signified the end of the conversation. He shook hands and departed. He was in fairly good spirits until he remembered the Vance angle.

"I might as well make that hurdle now," he told himself. He telephoned Vance and managed to reach him. The man's voice was cold and annoyed.

"I've taken up the Red Desert business with Mr. Jenner," Spruce said. "He's going to ask you to look into this. You'll recall that you turned me down without investigation."

"So you've taken it over my head?" snapped Vance. "Trying to do me dirt?"

"What do you think?" Spruce retorted. "I never mentioned the fact that you turned down the deal."

"Most kind of you," Vance sneered. Spruce hung up, with the hope that Vance would calm down and think things over.

Knowing that Thatcher would be nervously awaiting his return, Spruce went directly to the newspaper office.

"I've read your reports," the editor told him. "They're satisfactory and I've ordered the material you'll need. Now tell me what Jeff Jenner said."

Thatcher smiled at the start, but frowned when Les Vance's name was mentioned. "I don't trust the fellow," he declared. "He'll do his best to dull Jenner's interest. He's a

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smooth one. Makes Jenner think he's a hard worker. Jenner likes hard workers. He'll stand by them. Well, only time will tell. Now what about Rattlesnake Springs?"

"I'd like to see plenty of water at the springs before the ducks fly South . . . enough so the water won't be heavy with alkali and kill them when they drop down to rest," Spruce answered.

"What is the Granite Springs situation?"

"Not a large waterhole. It has only a small bird population," Spruce explained, "but it's bang up against Bland's property, and the key spot in the final fight."

"I get the picture," said the publisher. "Well, hop to it. Let's hope the freeze up in the North comes late and the ducks hang around up there."

THE Grady ranch became the base from which the various units operated. Spruce put the largest gang to work on the Rattlesnake Springs hole. The men built a makeshift road for the lightest truck because the distance was too great for back packing. At points like Quail Springs, Tule Well and Lost Springs where little work was necessary, material was packed in. Spruce ran a temporary telephone line to the ranch in case Thatcher wanted to call him, or he needed supplies. Thatcher's voice came over the line one morning.

"Les Vance is on his way to Red Desert," he announced. "Thought you'd like to know."

Spruce knew this fight was the first test. If he didn't give Snead a thorough going over, he'd have to get himself another crew.

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"Thanks," Spruce answered. "He should be along any time."

Spruce remained at the Grady ranch for the next forty-eight hours, then when Vance still did not put in an appearance, he hopped in a small truck and began searching for the missing man. After a ten-hour search Spruce located Vance at the Circle B Ranch. Bland was entertaining him in royal style and, from what Spruce could learn, was using the opportunity to knock the project.

Vance arrived a day later, somewhat the worse for wear, and in anything but an open-minded mood. He brushed hospitality aside and demanded brusquely: "How soon can I make the rounds? Three hours, a day or . . . what?"

Spruce wanted to tell him he'd be in no shape to rough it for a couple of days. Instead he said: "It depends on how much you want to see. It should take several days."

"Several days! I can't waste all that time," Vance complained.

"We haven't worked miracles in transportation," said Spruce, "so it'll take time." He restrained an impulse to make a few cracks about the time Vance had spent with Bland. "Suppose you get some rest, then we'll decide what to do."

"We'll decide, eh?" sneered Vance. "Now get this, Renfro, I'll conduct my own tour and you'll take me where I want to go."

"Exactly," Spruce answered. "We might as well understand each other. You're here looking for evidence that'll convince Jenner the project is foolish. O. K. But just as a friendly warning to offset some of the bunk Bland's been feeding you, don't jump at too many conclusions."

CHAPTER V

A LETTER FROM JENNER

WHEN the time came Les Vance was glad to depart and Spruce was happy to see him go. Spruce called Thatcher on the telephone that night.

"I took Vance everywhere and showed him everything," he reported, "and helped him get the pictures he wanted, but he refused to see merit in any part of the project. He was not only discouraging much of the time, but downright unfriendly."

"We can't let that get us down," Thatcher said. "What's on your program?"

"There are many washes crossing Red Desert and emptying into the river," Spruce answered. "Cloudbursts send walls of water down so fast it doesn't have a chance to seep into the ground. I'd like to build a series of check dams to hold water. Later, I'd like to tackle the biggest job of all . . . Granite Springs. How is the money holding out?"

"It is going to be nip and tuck until we win Jenner over," Thatcher admitted, "but you keep driving away, and I'll raise the money."

"You know, if you could swing it, you could buy most of the desert for a song, and really clean-up big when the water comes back," Spruce suggested.

"I know it," answered Thatcher, "but I'm a newspaperman, not a rancher. If I break even and create a duck refuge on the side I'll be happy."

Spruce began building check dams the next day, and a week later Marion Grady rode up with a letter.

"It's from Jefferson Jenner," she said, "and quite heavy. I thought it might be important."

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"Thanks, plenty," Spruce answered. Opening the letter, he read:

DEAR RENFRO: Here's a set of pictures my man Vance took. He neglected to caption them. Will you please indicate what phase of the Red Desert improvement they cover, and return?

Vance reported that an earthquake had broken the underground channels supplying the desert wells. This information, I believe, was obtained from one Bland, who has a very thorough knowledge of the region. What do you know about this?

Yours truly,
J. R. JENNER.

"Why, the dirty—" Spruce began, then choked back the remainder. "Vance didn't give the old man copies of all of the pictures he took. The important ones showing the swamp area that can be reclaimed; those showing dead and dying animals, and three taken showing the green area of your ranch were left out."

"A little gentlemanly knifing," observed the girl.

"Is the earthquake one of Bland's lies?"

"A half truth," she answered. "We had an earthquake several years ago. But the wells flowed as freely afterward. Evidently Vance said nothing of my ranch drying up, nor did he mention the loss to the government in leasing fees or outright sale of the land. Otherwise Jenner would have commented on it.

Mention of leasing fees opened the way for Spruce to inquire whether or not Marion had decided to gamble heavily and buy up a few sections of Red Desert, but he put that temptation aside. He did say: "I'm going to take time to tell you you've been open-minded about this from the day we explained our plans. You've given us the benefit of the doubt and co-operated with us. Sure, you had much to gain and little to lose, but you'd have backed our play anyway. Say, what do you think of my tough mugs?"

"I wish dad had had them when he was active," replied Marion. "He would have set Bland back on his heels. They're all fine."

"I'm strong for Skimmed-milk Sam Bradford," Spruce said. "I wonder if he'll ever get his cow?"

"He's priceless," Marion answered lightly. Spruce detected a faint flush on her cheeks as she went on in a more serious mood: "And he'll get his cow—a herd of them—and get them through his own efforts. He isn't looking for a soft spot. He isn't the type."

"Right," Spruce said. "Thanks for the letter. Well, it's time I got to work. Tonight I'll write the captions for Jenner."

WHEN the Granite Springs job appeared on the schedule, Spruce and his men arrived without blare of trumpets. If opposition came from any source Spruce wanted to be well into the job. Everyone worked with a wary eye on Bland's side of the fence.

With the aid of a bulldozer they pushed rocks out of the way, filled in several depressions and made a road of sorts over which they could carry supplies to this, the scene of the final operation.

As soon as supplies were on hand the men began digging into the springs, proper, driving a shaft downward until they encountered granite. This proved to be mostly heavy blocks that had broken off some underground dike. A few charges of powder shattered the blocks so they could be handled readily. From granite, they went into sand and gravel again.

When Friday night came, Spruce said: "You boys knock off and take

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your usual week end. I'll stay on the job."

Skimmed-milk Sam and Squint stopped dead in their tracks. "We're spendin' the week end right here with you," the latter declared. "I guess Sam can miss seein' Marion Grady just this once."

"None of your wisecracks," growled Sam. "Sure, I'll stay."

"The punchers seem to be gathering at the mine," another man remarked, nodding at the boundary two hundred feet away. "Suppose we all stay? After all, our job ain't finished until we're through with Granite Springs."

Spruce appreciated their willingness to remain and face possible trouble and he told them so. Granite Springs was the key to his entire plan, and the increasingly heavy guard at the mine might be significant. Only barbed wire separated the Circle B punchers from the haywire outfit.

The week end proved quiet, but Les Vance arrived early Monday morning. Spruce had heard nothing from either Vance or Jeff Jenner since the latter had sent photographs to be captioned. Bland and Snead were with Vance.

"Keep your pick handles ready," Spruce warned his men. "We haven't any friends in that bunch."

Bland climbed the fence. Snead and Vance followed.

"There's no reason why we shouldn't inspect this work, is there, Mr. Bland?" Vance said. "It's government property."

"That's the queer part of this set-up," Bland declared. "This happens to be the private mining property of Spruce Renfro." His voice took on a note of exaggerated politeness. "Mr. Renfro, can we come onto your property?"

"Why not?" Spruce answered.

"There's something here I don't get," said Vance. "Bland, you brought me here on the promise to show crookedness on Renfro's part. Well?"

"See that little pile of stones?" Bland asked. "It's a monument marking a mining claim corner. In an empty tomato tin you'll find a piece of paper stating that this is Renfro's claim. Not Thatcher's, nor anyone else's."

"I get it," Vance said softly. He walked over to Spruce. "Well, my fine-feathered cock," he said tauntingly, "you've slipped and laid yourself open to criminal charges. You've put men employed by Thatcher on your private mine."

SPRUCE'S men looked dumfounded. Few had given the corner monuments any thought.

"Vance," Spruce said, "you've knocked every part of this deal from the first. You've refused to listen to anything I've had to say. I've warned you not to go off half cocked before, and I'm warning you again."

"You're on the run," sneered Vance, "and you know it. I'm going to photograph this set-up and you aren't going to stop me."

"Sure, go the limit," Spruce invited. "I'll even pose by one of the monuments while you take a picture. But don't think you can get me in wrong with Thatcher."

"You're bluffing about posing," Vance said. "And I'm calling your bluff."

Spruce walked over to the nearest monument and posed while Vance took his pictures. Vance began to look puzzled and less sure of himself, but he went ahead taking close-ups of Spruce and his monuments.

As soon as Vance and the others

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left, Spruce got into a light truck and drove to the Grady ranch.

"I need a couple of guards," he told Marion.

"We're your men," one of the ancient Grady punchers said quickly. "We can't be bluffed, bribed or run out of the country."

Spruce knew that they meant it. He hired them, then divided his men into three shifts and kept rock moving twenty-four hours a day. Under cover of darkness he rushed in mine timbers, which were concealed in the dump. The men were down to bedrock.

"Start tunneling toward Bland's property line," Spruce ordered. "Bedrock tilts slightly upward, so don't cut holes through it. Follow it."

He returned to the Grady ranch Sunday night and found a call from Thatcher waiting.

"Vance tells me you've some kind of a gold mine on the side," the editor said. "He infers that you're crooked. I don't believe him, but there's something in the wind. The sheriff and county attorney in that country are political friends of Bland's. They wanted me to swear out a warrant for your arrest, charging the false use of funds. I wouldn't do it. They may go ahead anyway."

"Thanks for the tip, Mr. Thatcher," Spruce answered. "However, I won't run. I'll keep under cover, if I can. The trouble is, I wouldn't know the sheriff if I saw him. He probably doesn't know me either, though, so that makes it even."

"I just wanted you to know I'm stringing with you on this . . . to the finish," Thatcher said. "I wish there was some way of waking up Jenner. He used to sense when a man was putting something over on him. Well, watch your step, son."

WHEN Spruce hung up, Marion said: "More trouble?"

"Nothing that I didn't expect," answered Spruce.

"A good rain might help," the girl suggested. "If it started the wells and waterholes flowing—even a trickle—it would prove you right."

"If Red River was runnin'," Jud Elliott, one of the punchers, observed, "we'd have water." He had served three generations of Gradys and felt free to speak his mind. In his younger days Jud had been a man of action. Now age had slowed him down physically, but mentally he was as active as ever. "If we don't get water, Marion's goin' to own more worthless land than any rancher in the West."

"Jud!" The girl spoke sharply.

"Heck," Jud said. "I forgot."

"Did you buy a chunk of Red Desert?" Spruce asked.

"Yes," the girl answered a little defiantly. "I decided to gamble on your success. I bought several sections of the best. Paid the government a fair price, too. But I didn't want you to know. I was afraid you'd think you had got me into something and would worry."

"You'll get water," Spruce predicted.

"She'll get it," Jud added with a grimness that escaped the younger folks, "one way or another."

"I want one thing understood, Spruce," Marion said. "I used my own judgment in this, acting on a tip. Win, lose or draw, you're not to blame."

"You're a dead-game sport," Spruce said with admiration.

Spruce turned in, only to be awakened at daylight by the arrival of a truckload of supplies.

"Here's the powder you ordered," the truck driver said. "Where do you want it stored?"

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"Unload the grub here," Spruce directed, "and leave the powder in an open field. The boys will be down from Granite Springs with the light truck later on."

The big truck was unloaded and gone when the light truck arrived. While the light truck crew was loading the powder, Jud Elliott joined them. He liked all of the boys, particularly Skimmed-milk Sam Bradford. He was fond of Squint Tremper, too. In his younger days Jud had been a tough, hot-tempered hombre despite his small stature. The breed didn't always do the right thing in an emergency, but it could be depended on to act.

"How strong are you two boys for Spruce Renfro?" Jud inquired.

"Stronger'n horse radish," Sam answered. "You may not like the way he slicks up, and all that, but after what he done to Snead, why—"

"When you're as old as I am you can see through the surface," Jud interrupted. "These here wells have got to flow. Now I was thinkin' if there was some way we could make the Red River dam leak a little, it might—"

"It'd give life to Marion's spread," Sam finished quickly. "But if we monkeyed with the dam we might get Spruce in wrong."

"Spruce don't need to know it," argued Jud. "Somethin' happens, water gets into Red River again, and wells flow—"

"It's somethin' to think about," Squint admitted. "Somethin' that'll take plenty of thinkin', too."

CHAPTER VI

PROOF OF THE PUDDING

A WEEK after the powder had arrived and been cached at Granite Springs, Spruce was sitting in the Grady parlor waiting for a call from Thatcher and listening to the radio. Suddenly the program was interrupted with a crackle of static.

"Thunderstorm!" Marion exclaimed. "Somebody's getting rain."

Gradually the static increased until the program was worthless. Spruce stepped outside. The sky was overcast, and in the distance he could see lightning striking the desert. Marion came out and joined him.

"I hope it covers a wide area," Spruce said.

"It usually falls heavily in the upper canyons," Marion explained. "I felt a raindrop!"

Spruce turned his face upward and presently a drop splashed on his chin. "I wish there had been enough of that drop to knock me out," he said feelingly. "That lightning is getting closer."

A half-hour later it was all around them. Rain began falling lightly and the air took on a moist, earthly odor.

"You can have your swell perfumes," declared Spruce. "I'll take that odor for mine."

"It suits me," Marion agreed.

Then the rain came, with lightning flashes followed by thunder. It beat against the windows as if someone were turning a hose on them, and the rattle on the roof was incessant. The rain died down, only to return again and again. It ended in a gentle fall that kept up until nearly dawn.

Spruce awakened to find a steaming world and bright sunshine. He climbed onto a light truck and asked Marion to go along with him. They bounced over the poor road at a reckless speed. Twice Spruce found streams running down the canyons. He stopped at a point high up called

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Dry Wash. Here they had put in a series of check dams.

Dry Wash was plenty wet. Behind each dam was a fair-sized lake. But even the series of dams couldn't hold all the water that had roared down the wash. Spruce went on to other places. Every check dam was holding nicely.

"It's too bad Les Vance can't see all this," Marion said. "How long before the wells should flow?"

Spruce shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know," he admitted.

He took the girl home, reported to Thatcher by telephone, then headed for Granite Springs. Sam Bradford was in charge of operations and he explained they had been following a fault in the granite, blasting out rock that had filled the space between the walls of the fault.

"Any signs of water?" asked Spruce.

"No. And it rained like the devil here last night," Sam replied.

Spruce descended to bedrock, a hundred and fifty feet, then crawled through the tunnel the boys were driving. The tunnel measured four feet by four feet on the average, though there were larger sections where loose rock had been removed. Almost no timbering had been necessary.

"We figger we're about five feet from Bland's property line," one man said.

"Keep going," ordered Spruce.

When he returned to the surface, Sam reported that Circle B riders had been seen moving toward the different waterholes. "Keepin' close check on things," Sam observed.

THE seven days following the rain were tense ones for Spruce Renfro. He sent a man to each waterhole, and invariably the man found a delegate from Circle B on the job. The Circle B riders were a mocking group, gleefully pointing to dry holes. Several fights followed when the jeering went too far.

The tenth day Les Vance arrived, carrying his camera.

"You still here?" he asked Spruce. "I thought somebody got out a warrant for you. The district attorney, Phil Land, hopped on the case. He's a new man, you know, out to make a reputation."

"He's probably working up a case before he makes an arrest," Spruce answered. "When he shows up, I'll be here."

"That's just the trouble," Squint remarked to Sam when Vance was beyond earshot. "Spruce will be here. And he should dodge the law until this job's done. Another two weeks would complete it. If we just had power drills instead of the hand stuff, we could make time in the granite."

Spruce piled the work onto his force, as if hoping to finish before the blow fell. He was at Granite Springs when Marion rode up to tell him there was an urgent call from Thatcher. Spruce hung up a new record in driving a light truck over bad roads. As soon as he picked up the phone he knew from Thatcher's voice that something had happened.

"Spruce, your men are charged with an attempt to blow up Red Desert Dam in order to get water for your holes," Thatcher said. "Now I know you aren't fool enough to do anything like that. But some of your well-meaning boys might do something reckless."

"What kind of an attempt?" Spruce demanded. He knew if there had been even partial success, Red River would be running bank full.

"Whoever it was didn't have enough powder," explained Thatcher. "But there's hell to pay.

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And it was timed nicely as a follow-up to Vance's report to Jenner of dry holes."

"That's it. It was timed," Spruce said wrathfully. "None of my boys did it. They've been too busy at Granite Springs." Or had they? Spruce wondered. They were an aggressive lot. Once won to a man or cause, they would stop at nothing. Anyone of them might take a short cut, such as blowing the dam. Then there was an outside chance that one of Marion Grady's old punchers had taken the same short cut. In any event it looked bad for the haywire outfit.

"Are the holes entirely dry?" asked Thatcher.

"Not a drop," Spruce admitted. "Getting back to the dam . . . how about guarding it?"

"According to reports, Bland sent his riders up there to do guard duty, until the sheriff's men could arrive," Thatcher replied. "They're certainly dishing it out to you, kid. Finish everything up as soon as you can, then hunt a storm cellar. Vance is fanning the flames."

While Spruce was finishing his conversation, someone drove up and began talking to Marion Grady. She came in and said: "A man to see you, Spruce."

"Does he pack a star?"

"I'd hardly think so," the girl replied. "Jud Elliott nicknamed him Pale-face Art."

SPRUCE went out to meet Pale-face Art. He had never seen a sadder man. Evidently after spending most of his fifty-odd years indoors, Pale-face Art had abruptly gone in for sunshine. Great patches of skin had peeled from his face and neck, leaving bright pink areas. Dark glasses had protected his eyes, and the skin adjacent was the color of very old cheese.

Spruce's first impulse was to treat the man pleasantly, but get rid of him. A second glance revealing the shrewdness in Pale-face Art's eyes made him change his mind. They were as shrewd and calculating as Squint Tremper's.

"What can I do for you?" asked Squint.

"My doctor ordered me into the open," Art explained. "And I got into it too fast. Picked up a bad case of sunburn. I'd heard you were working here and thought I'd like the country. I'm roughing it." He pointed to a light car loaded with canteens, gasoline, food and camping equipment. "If it isn't too much trouble I'd like a sketch showing the way to the various waterholes."

Spruce drew a sketch and gave it to him. "Be careful not to get lost," he warned.

"I won't. Don't worry. I'll come popping up here and there," Art said brightly.

Pale-face Art was in the act of leaving when a swirling cloud came to a stop before the house. Two of the haywire outfit jumped off a light truck, noticed a stranger was present, and shut up tightly. This didn't escape Art, but he said nothing.

"We want some orders, Spruce," one of the men said.

"Sure." Spruce led them away. "What's up?"

"A jasper showed up at Granite Springs with a warrant for your arrest," one of them said. "He asked for Spruce Renfro and right off the bat Squint Tremper said: 'I'm your man, officer!' The officer was a deputy sheriff. He loaded Squint into his car and away they went."

"Nobody's going to take a rap for me," Spruce growled. "Get into that truck, and away *we* go."

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Spruce drove to Granite Springs and found everyone above ground. They had seen him coming.

"What'd the sheriff say?" he asked Sam Bradford.

"Nothing, except something about the proof of the pudding being in the eating," Sam replied. "I figgered he was referrin' to the dry wells."

"Here's what I want you to do. Finish the tunnel to Bland's property line," Spruce directed, "then follow the plan I outlined. Don't let anyone know how deep the well is, nor about the tunnel."

"We guard the place, and keep our mouths shut," Sam assured him. "Snead come over once, and asked how deep we was goin' and I told him you said to dig until we could hear Chinaman talkin'."

"Good! S'long," Spruce said. "Squint should be back on the job as soon as I can take his place. That's all. You know what to do."

"Yeah," Sam said softly, "I know what to do." He swung without warning and caught Spruce flush on the jaw. Spruce dropped like a wet rag. "I hated to do it," Sam observed sadly, "but it sure had to be done."

CHAPTER VII

HUNGRY GROUND

SPRUCE was soaking wet when he regained consciousness. For several seconds he couldn't figure out what had happened. Then he got slowly to his feet.

"Sam, you dirty double-crossing —" he began. That was as far as he got. Two men grabbed and held him.

"Now I'll talk," Sam said. "When we come and told you Squint had gone to jail in your place, it wasn't so you could save him a few hours or days behind the bars. It was to give you a chance to finish things before the marshal learned the truth. Then you go and get fightin' mad, so I had to pop you one. Can't you see you're more good here than in jail?"

"I suppose so," Spruce admitted reluctantly, "but—"

"Never mind the buts. Jail won't hurt Squint. He's glad to do it. Now what?"

"You win," Spruce said. "I'm going to take four of you and head for Red River Dam. We'll be driving most of the night, because the roads aren't hot, but we should be there in the morning. I don't want anybody framing us."

Spruce had included Skimmed-milk Sam in the party. Shortly after dark, Sam noticed someone was following them. A pair of headlights gleaming like two pale eyes bobbed up and down behind them, hour after hour.

"Shall we stop and slap 'em down?" inquired Sam.

"No. No need of making more enemies," Spruce replied.

They stopped about a mile from the dam and waited for daylight. The following car came alongside of them. Pale-face Art yawned and summoned a grin.

"Mornin', gents!" he said casually.

"Why're you followin' us?" demanded Sam.

"Nothing else to do."

Spruce and Sam looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders. There didn't seem to be much they could do about Art, but Spruce wasn't forgetting the shrewdness of the man's eyes.

Daylight revealed a couple of Circle B men camped below the dam, and several armed guards.

"You're supposed to be in jail, Spruce," Sam said. "I'd better do

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"Clear out or we'll fire!" the girl warned, and a cocked shotgun emphasized the order.

the talkin' here." He approached the guard. "We're part of the outfit accused of dynamiting this dam. I'll say this much, if we'd tried to blow her up, she'd have blown. We'd like to look around, under guard, of course, and see if we can't spot evidence that'll show who done the job."

The guard referred Sam to the man in charge. He proved to be a tough hombre who viewed all mankind with suspicion. He insulted Sam and Sam insulted him right back again. They yelled at each other, cursed some, then the man agreed to take the party about. Spruce had remained silent and inactive with difficulty. Nothing suited him better than a little clean, two-fisted insulting.

The Circle B men protested violently. "We keep them tramps offn the dam," one said, "then you let 'em snoop around. No tellin' what dirty work they'll put over."

"They'll put no dirty work over on me," the guard said grimly.

"Mind if I come along, too?" Paleface Art inquired.

"Come along. You look harmless enough," the chief guard answered. He led the way to the tracks, which were being carefully preserved. "You see, Bradford, the blasters come up the old bed, which didn't show much in tracks. Then they starts diggin'. Dirt scattered around, filled in between the rocks, and their feet left tracks."

"They sure did," Spruce said, stepping up. "Now let's go along

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the river bed a ways." He walked a quarter mile before he found a long, sandy stretch. The sand was moist from bank seepage, and it was covered with tracks of men who hadn't taken care to disguise their steps.

"Tracks left by your men's boots," Pale-face Art observed. "It looks bad."

"I'm afraid you're right," admitted Spruce. "Next question is, whose feet were inside of the boots?"

Spruce left without answering his own query, and Pale-face Art seemed a little disappointed.

When they were in the truck and headed back toward Granite Springs, Sam said: "Them tracks were left by our men's boots just as Art said. Men have been hanged on less evidence than that. How're you going to explain it?"

"That's another hurdle we'll have to take," Spruce replied.

"It seems like nothin' ever breaks your way," complained Sam. "I'd have sworn that thunderstorm would've filled the wells for a day or two at least. Instead, it backfired provin' even a thunderstorm, with all our flood control, didn't help."

"Yeah," another man grumbled, "and before we know it, the ducks will be flyin' South. One thing, though, there ain't no poison water for 'em to settle on."

MARION GRADY was waiting at Granite Springs when they arrived. "Thatcher will call you at ten o'clock tomorrow morning," she told Spruce. "His voice sounded discouraged, I thought. He seemed rather glad you weren't around to answer the telephone."

"More grief," Sam said.

"That means a drive to the ranch," Spruce mused. "I wish we had a telephone here, but if our boss ran telephones all over the desert there wouldn't be any money left for flood control."

Spruce went below ground and took a hand in the drilling. He felt this might be his last free day. Things had caught up with him. He quit work at daybreak, changed clothes, and drove to the ranch to accept Marion's breakfast invitation.

The expected call came at ten o'clock. Chester Thatcher's voice was weary, as the girl had said. "Spruce, the jig's up. I've urged delays, I've stalled. I've used what influence I have to gain time, and I've gained it. They learned yesterday that Squint isn't you, and they're doping out charges against him now. I called up Jenner and told him what Vance was up to."

"What did he say?"

"He said: 'Let this work itself out. Somebody's crooked and time will show who it is,'" Thatcher answered. "I can't stop the sheriff and district attorney, either. They're working so fast it strikes me they're afraid of a backfire if they don't get you quick. On top of that my bank has been told the project is crazy, and that you're crazier. I've been instructed to fire you or they'll get tough on my loans."

"I'm fired?"

"Yes, Renfro, you're fired."

Something in the tone of Thatcher's voice told Spruce the editor was waiting for him to make the next move.

"I'm not leaving the job until it's done," Spruce said. "I don't know whether you are Thatcher, or not. Maybe you're one of Bland's men trying to put something over. Send me a written order if you want to fire me." He wasn't sure, but he thought he heard a chuckle over the

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wire as he hung up the receiver.

"Smart boy," said Marion. "You've given yourself a reprieve."

"Desperate guy, you mean," Spruce retorted. "I've got to roll now."

He broke all records getting back to Granite Springs. His men gathered about him expectantly.

"This is the beginning of Custer's last stand, boys," he said.

"You get some rest," Sam advised. "You can't drive yourself forever, you know."

Spruce flopped down in the tunnel, intending only to relax. When he awakened he was covered with a blanket and the men had knocked off work. A flashlight revealed that a set of deep holes had been driven in the end of the tunnel and were ready for loading. Cases of powder were stacked nearby and some kind of discussion was going on at the bottom of the shaft.

"What's up?" Spruce asked.

"A row going on, on the surface," one of the men answered.

"Let's get up there," said Spruce.

"We can't. Somebody cut the windlass rope." A rock came hurtling down the shaft and they retired hastily into the tunnel. "All they've got to do is drop rocks, and there isn't much we can do."

SPRUCE looked up and saw blue sky. It was two hundred feet to the surface. Now two hundred feet on the level isn't a great distance, but straight up it's something else. The walls of the shaft had been built of granite slabs cemented together. The men had done a good construction job. A daring man, Spruce concluded, might work his way up by keeping back against one wall and climbing with his feet.

If he slipped, though, there would be no stopping him. And if someone dropped a rock on him when he was on his way up, that would be fatal.

"You can't do it, Spruce," one of the men said, guessing his thoughts. "Our only hope is that the boys will win, then lower a rope for us."

Spruce crouched in the tunnel and swore. "The big fight," he yelled, "and I'm not in it! Come on. We'll load holes and be ready to touch off the final blast if we get the chance."

They broke open the cases of powder, thrust the sticks into the drilled holes and tamped them into place with long rods. Spruce inserted dynamite caps into the sticks, put fuses into caps and crimped them with his teeth. He also cut the fuses various lengths. Above ground the battle continued to rage.

"They must be fighting all over the place," remarked Spruce. "Wonder who's winning? Our boys, if they have anything approaching an even chance."

"It must be a fist and club affair," a man said. "I haven't heard a shot fired."

"Bland's too smart to start gunplay, because our men aren't armed," Spruce declared. He took a quick look, then ducked back, as several granite slabs came down. Suddenly the hole was darkened, but the rocks continued to fall. They heard the creak of the windlass and an abrupt clatter of boots on bedrock.

"They've dropped men in on us," Spruce shouted. Thanks to shattered rock, which had been easy to move, the area at the bottom of the shaft was an irregular chamber seven feet high, eight feet wide and nine feet in length. The tunnel followed bedrock and, though but four feet high, opened into this chamber.

Five Circle B men had been low-

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ered from above. Spruce knew that only the toughest and most desperate men on the spread would be assigned the job of mopping up the group underground. He realized the entire fight had been staged for one purpose—to learn exactly what was going on at the bottom of the waterhole, or mine, whichever way one cared to view it.

Spruce began swinging at the men in front of him. He was doing fairly well until a man flanked him and almost shifted his head off its base. Then someone dragged him into the tunnel, out of the way, and the fight continued.

Spruce regained consciousness to find himself under a man's bleeding body. He got to his knees, waited until his head cleared, then staggered back into the fight. It was an eerie scene, made possible by flashlights dropped on the tunnel floor and the faint light coming from above.

A man in the chamber was slugging it out with a Circle B hard case, while a second puncher from the spread, weakened by the battering he had received, was on a haywire outfit man's back, trying to drag him down. Spruce hurled himself on that worthy and all four went down in a tangled heap.

KICKING and slugging, they carried on the fight, minute after minute, at a pace that drained the reserve of every man. A thumb began gouging Spruce's eye.

"I'll spoil your looks, you blasted dude!" the Bland man gasped. Spruce caught the offending hand, held it off and tried to twist his head clear. The thumb followed, but couldn't quite reach its mark. Spruce got his teeth into the man's little finger and set them deep.

"Damn it!" the man roared. "Let go!"

When the thumb moved away, Spruce let go. Another Bland man, on his feet, began driving a high-heeled boot into Spruce's stomach and groin.

"We've got 'em on the run," he bellowed at his companions. "Finish 'em off."

Spruce tried to avoid the fellow's boot, at the same time continue his work on the eye gouger. He couldn't get in a good punch, but he pulled the man's head toward him, and when the latter instinctively resisted, Spruce suddenly dashed the head backward against the wall. The man collapsed, and Spruce turned his full attention to the man giving him the boot. Drawing his own feet back, he drove both heels against the leg on which the man stood while dealing out punishment.

The man bellowed with pain as his body tumbled against Spruce's knees.

"You've busted my leg," he moaned.

"That was the idea," gasped Spruce. He got up and looked around. A punch-drunk Renfro man was staggering about, and three of his companions were sprawled with backs against the wall, panting from their efforts.

Noses and cuts were bleeding, and sweat was pouring down dirt-streaked faces.

"We licked 'em!" the punch-drunk lad cried jubilantly.

Spruce looked at the patch of sky above. Whoever had lowered the Circle B men had made retreat impossible by winding up the rope again. The first rope, cut at the beginning of the fight, lay in a heap on bedrock. The second was beyond reach—a loose end dangling about a hundred and fifty feet above them.

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"I wish I could do that Hindu rope trick," Spruce said. "Toss the rope into the air and climb it."

He rested a while, then began climbing the wall.

"You can't do it," one of his men argued. "You'll cut your back to bits before you reach the top."

Spruce cut several strips from pack sacks, padded them, then lashed them across his shoulders and back, with the aid of belts taken from the others. He climbed slowly, sliding his back up a few inches, thrusting his toes against projecting bits of stone or cement and shoving his back up again. It seemed easy at first. But at fifty feet he began to wonder. When he had covered a hundred feet his spine and legs were enduring agony. He could hear the man below piling up empty powder boxes, and covering them with rope and clothing to break the fall they were sure was inevitable.

The remaining fifty feet were sheer torture, but finally Spruce grasped the rope and began pulling. It unwound. He tied knots every twenty feet, though toward the last the rope was too long and too heavy to handle. He grasped it tightly when it stopped unwinding, then began sliding down from knot to knot. A half dozen hands caught him as he fell the last ten feet.

"Knew I couldn't go up," he gasped.

He lay on the bedrock, watching, while the strongest man of the five, climbed from knot to knot. Spruce breathed a sigh of relief as the man disappeared over the top, windlassed the rope, attached the largest bucket and lowered it.

SPRUCE was the first man brought to the surface. He gazed in bewilderment at the scene above ground. Thirteen of his men on the surface had accounted for eighteen Circle B men, but at heavy cost. They had had more room to fight than Spruce and his four companions. As a result the desert was littered with men, two being almost a quarter of a mile from the scene.

A half dozen school boys could have beaten the entire lot. Every man had fought himself into a state of exhaustion. Snead was unconscious. Bland himself was wandering aimlessly about, pressing his hand against his head, while Skimmed-milk Sam watched him, ready to get to his feet if necessary, but wondering where the strength would come from.

To climax the affair, Pale-face Art rose unsteadily from a heap of debris. "I tried to remain neutral and see the fun," he muttered, "but in the heat of battle, both sides took punches at me."

Spruce helped windlass those in the tunnel to the surface, and as the last man came up, Sam joined him.

"I don't want to be a wet blanket, Spruce," Sam said wearily, "but more people are comin' over the desert. Since we ain't got any friends in these parts, they must be enemies."

Spruce gazed at the dust cloud, advancing along a road they had built. "Lower me down," he said. "There's one more job to be done."

Sam looked at him doubtfully. "Sure you're up to it?"

"I'm plenty used up," Spruce admitted, "but I think I've bounced back."

Two boxes of powder remained. Ordinarily Spruce would have sent them up, but now he placed them at the base of the well lining, and heaped rock on them. He went into the tunnel and lighted the fuses, including one leading to the two

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boxes of powder. Then he signaled to be hauled up.

"Now everybody stand well back," Spruce ordered when Sam had brought him to the top.

Haywire outfit and Circle B men moved to a safe distance, the former keeping a wary eye on the latter. A minute passed, then the earth shook sullenly. At split-second intervals other explosions followed, then a deep silence settled on the land.

"Wait!" Spruce ordered. "There's one more!"

Then it came, shooting debris from the mouth of the waterhole. The roar of falling cement and stones filled the air, the masonry at the top of the shaft tumbled below, leaving an irregular hole.

"In a few minutes," Spruce said, "the law will nab me and take me away. I've no idea when I'll be back, but I don't intend anyone to snoop in my mine while I'm away."

"Good reason," Bland sneered. "You've probably discovered, as we did, that this is hungry ground."

CHAPTER VIII

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

THE posse arrived at Granite Springs in a cloud of dust. The sheriff in charge had twin duties to perform—keep order and arrest Spruce Renfro. Two of his deputies looked over the scene and shook their heads.

"Bland's men were tough, but the haywire outfit was tougher," one said. "I've never seen so much damage to human faces and clothing."

"It was a tough one, all right," the sheriff admitted. "Tops a fight between miners and cowpunchers in which my home town was wrecked. I was town marshal at the time, and lasted about five minutes." He walked over to Spruce and said: "Come on, Renfro."

"O. K," Spruce agreed. "Sam, you're in command of the haywire boys. And, sheriff, you might as well arrest Bland and his men for attempted claim jumping. Hold them in your jail until they put up bond to stay away from my claim."

"I might as well make a clean sweep," said the lawman. He was beginning to think there might be a lot of influence behind Spruce, and he was a man who believed in getting on a band wagon. He pointed to Pale-face Art. "Who's this cuss?"

"I'm neither fish nor fowl," Art answered for himself. "I'm merely a man out here for my health."

"You'd better change your scenery, then," a deputy advised. "It don't seem healthy in these parts."

When Spruce was brought into town, Chester Thatcher was on hand to put up his bail.

"You've certainly been through the mill," the publisher said. "Black eyes, bruised chin and hands, and you've lost weight, too. But your spirit seems as strong as ever. Hair combed again, and all spruced up, too."

"I suppose Vance is yelling, 'I told you so,' over the Red Desert deal?" Spruce said.

"Yes, he's making the most of it," Thatcher admitted. "He's rubbing it into Jeff Jenner, too, because the old boy was leaning your way. But I'm afraid there'll be no Dismal Mesa development now."

"Can't tell about that," Spruce said. "Right now the only thing I'm interested in is sleeping for about a week."

"That's all arranged," Thatcher told him. "I'm taking you home

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with me. By the way, I got quite a kick out of your refusing to be fired by telephone. I hoped you'd take some such stand. Phil Land, the district attorney, will be over to see you. He's a little annoyed because Squint Tremper took your place."

PHIL LAND arrived in the city two weeks later. He found Spruce rested up and taking things easy.

"I hate to prosecute you," Land told him, "because, strangely enough, Mr. Thatcher, the wronged man, isn't anxious for me to go ahead. However, I'll have to make an example of you or the desert will be full of men starting mines on money trusted in their care."

"I'll give you a case that'll cover you with glory," Spruce promised. "Prosecute Butch Bland for attempting to blow up the Red River Dam. It wasn't a real attempt, but his men set off a charge of powder and tried to make it look as if we had done it."

"What proof have you got?"

"They stole boots from our camp and wore them when they set the charges. Being used to cowboy boots, they gave themselves away because the tracks showed they walked awkwardly and limped. By the way, arrest a man named Wagner. He was in the fight below the dam. He couldn't take it then, and if he thinks he's going over the road, he won't be able to take it now. He'll talk."

"I'll go into that," promised Land. He departed to round up additional evidence on Bland and his men, for he realized that if he moved against one politically powerful he had better prove his case or the backfire would burn him to a crisp.

Several days later Skimmed-milk Sam showed up. "Thatcher's set you up in fine shape," he told Spruce, "but you don't seem to be contented. You act like a man expecting somethin' to happen. Ain't in love, are you?"

"Why are *you* worried?" asked Spruce.

"Because I'm in love with Marion, too," Sam admitted.

"Marion will make a swell wife," Spruce said, "but for you, Sam. Not me. What are your plans?"

Sam breathed a relieved sigh. "That takes a load offn my mind," he declared. "I thought you might be after her. My plans? I'll work for Marion, and if the blasted wells start flowin' again, I'll get me a piece of land, round up some wild cattle I know about and . . . that'll be a start."

"It'll certainly furnish all the milk you can drink," Spruce said.

"Ain't it funny how so much can depend on a little water comin' out of a hole in the ground," Sam mused.

"Amen to that, brother!" Spruce agreed with feeling.

Three days later Spruce received a telephone call. He listened a moment and said: "Yes? Sure? Wow! Thanks, Marion, we'll start at once."

He hung up and called Phil Land. "How'd you like to build up a real case against Bland?" he questioned. "Conspiracy?"

"Lead me to it," Land answered.

"Hit the road for Granite Springs. And, say, how about releasing Squint Tremper? After all, he's small fry and his mistake was loyalty to me."

"I'll think about it," promised Land.

Next Spruce called Les Vance. "How'd you like to get on the Dis-

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mal Mesa band wagon?" he asked.

"That's out," said Vance. "You've thoroughly discredited yourself. Don't annoy me with future calls."

"I won't and that's a promise," Spruce answered. He called Jenner at his club. "Mr. Jenner, drive down to Granite Springs as soon as you can. The desert air will do you good."

The last call Spruce made was to Chester Thatcher. "Things are happening," he said. "How about a night ride to the desert?"

"You bet. We'll take my car and you can drive," Thatcher answered.

EARLY that evening they were roaring over mountain and desert. Spruce, thoroughly rested, had never felt better, and the car's high-powered motor was in tune with his feelings. It was four o'clock when they arrived at the Grady ranch, but Marion was up.

"Your headlights were reported a half-hour ago," she said, "and I have a breakfast ready for you. Rest a couple of hours, then we'll look over the country."

She called them at seven, and after gulping down hot coffee, they drove to the nearest waterhole. Water was flowing slowly, the concrete trough was full, and the parched ground around it was growing moist. Birds had already gathered.

"Water is coming from my artesian wells," Marion said, "as well as every hole in the desert. That's why I telephoned you, Spruce. This land is going to bloom again."

"Where do we go from here?" Thatcher asked.

"Granite Springs," answered Spruce. "The highest point in the region. That will be the real test. If water's flowing there, the theory I followed from the first will be proven."

As they neared the road to the springs a high-powered car cut in ahead of them. They ate dust, but Spruce found the taste sweet because the car belonged to Jefferson R. Jenner and Les Vance was with him. Mr. Vance was due for a few surprises today.

Jenner was just leaving his car when Spruce stopped. While greetings were exchanged, Skimmed-milk Sam Bradford and Squint Tremper arrived on a motorcycle the latter had borrowed.

"We had to see the fun," Squint explained. "I was let out of jail around midnight. Say, with Jenner here it looks like all of us might be ranching on Dismal Mesa some of these days."

"Not this bird," said Bradford. "I'm stayin' here for life."

"Marion," Squint demanded, "are you goin' to marry a cuss like him?"

"He'll do, with a little making over," Marion answered, smiling at Sam.

"Then by golly there's hope for a shrimp like me," Squint declared.

"Let's have the story, Renfro," suggested Jenner. "Everybody seems to be here."

Spruce brought out an old map showing the underground river he had traced. "Water once followed this course," he said. "Dead grass and brush prove that. It led to Circle B property and stopped. Now it struck me as queer that Bland's wells continued to flow while those below dried up. It looked to me as if that underground stream had been dammed."

"Bland?" Phil Land inquired.

"Who else?" asked Spruce. "He evidently learned that a natural dike ran along his property for miles.

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Water in the gravel above the dikes was held and released slowly after the rains. A break in the dike let water escape to the low desert."

"Logical enough," Jenner said.

BLAND figured if he dammed the break and dried up the lower country he could get the government range and Grady ranch for a song," Spruce continued. "He formed a fake mining company to give an excuse for digging around the dike. He sealed the break, claimed there was no gold in the mine, and that was that. When we showed up and began investigating what had happened he tried to discredit us in various ways. One of them was a bluff at blowing the Red River Dam."

"I wish that could be proved, Thatcher said.

"What's the matter with me?" Pale-face Art inquired.

"Nothing at all," Land said. "Art's one of my men, Renfro. He'd been working in an office for years and was run down. The doctor ordered him into the open and I sent him down here to investigate."

"About the first thing I learned was that the case was full of dynamite, and it was easy to go off half cocked," Art said. "First, it looked as if Renfro was developing a private mine at Thatcher's expense. Now it turns out— You tell 'em, Spruce."

"One way to find out whether the dike had been sealed was to go into the mining business, drill a shaft and have a look down there," Spruce said. "We had our look, saw that the dike had been sealed, so we touched off a blast and let the water through." Spruce looked around and concluded: "And I guess that's about all."

"No, it isn't," Jenner declared. "Vance, you were supposed to keep my business moving like I did. Take a chance now and again. Instead, you played safe and thought of yourself. You wouldn't even back another young fellow's gamble. It looks as if I'll have to run my own business hereafter. I'm getting rusty. Dismal Mesa will be a good place to get into harness again. Pay yourself off, Vance, and clean out your desk." He turned to Thatcher. "Chet, I was slow on the start, but I'll try and finish strong. How much are you in the hole?"

"I'll sell enough of the government range I bought to break even," Thatcher answered. "Seeing you in harness again is my profit. And I guess that *is* all."

"Arresting Bland and his bunch for conspiracy closes the case," said Phil Land. "And I'll include you in the bunch, Vance."

"Just when did you begin to doubt Vance, Mr. Jenner?" Spruce asked.

"When he brought back pictures of Red Desert that would discourage investigation," Jenner answered. "It seemed to me there must be some bright spots. And when you kept quiet and didn't accuse Vance of double-crossing you, I knew you were what they call a right guy. After that I gave Vance enough rope to hang himself." He looked over the desert shimmering in the sunlight. "Renfro, there's the finest mirage I've seen in many a year," he exclaimed.

"That," Spruce answered with a grin, "isn't a mirage. It's the marsh below Rattlesnake Springs flooding with water."

THE END

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BOOTHILL STAGE

by Rod Patterson

FRED YOST, station master at Rawhide, came out of his cubbyhole in the yellow-painted depot and spoke to the driver of the stagecoach. "Well, Steve, guess you'll be glad to see your brother again. Don't seem possible Danny's been gone two years."

Steve Tremper looped the ribbons around the brake handle of the big Concord and swung down to the platform. He was a tall young man with a good-natured, bronzed face and a ready smile. But he wasn't smiling now. His light-blue eyes held a sudden tense uneasiness.

"How'd you know Danny was comin' home?" he demanded, a tinge

Half drowned though he was, Curran lifted his gun to finish the job he had started.

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of anger in his tone.

The agent glanced at him. "Shucks, you didn't think you'd be able to keep the news from the sheriff, did you? Why, it was all over town ten minutes after McCabe got that wire this mornin'."

"What wire?" Steve demanded stiffly. "I didn't know about any wire."

"The wire that came from the warden at Yuma, sayin' that Danny was bein' paroled."

Steve's eyes darkened. "Seems like you can't keep anything quiet around here," he said, frowning.

Yost shrugged, then eyed the other sharply. "Say, Steve, you wasn't plannin' on totin' the kid up home on your rig, was you?"

"No? Why not?"

"Well"—the agent's deep-seamed face showed his surprise—"you seem to fergit about that contract you jest signed with the railroad."

"What's the contract got to do with it?" Steve said bluntly.

Yost massaged his beard-stubbled chin. "Why, you're carryin' that ten-thousand-dollar pay roll up to the West Yankee Mine t'day. The railroad people'd cancel everything if they got wind you was totin' a . . . a . . . if you was totin' Danny, too."

Steve's eyes were bitter. "You mean because Danny's a jailbird?"

"I didn't say that, son. I know how you feel, an' I admire you fer it. But that don't change the facts."

"Danny's paid for his mistake," Steve declared vehemently. "I aim to see he gets a chance."

"All right." Yost's tone was mollified. "All right. But the railroad investigator's due here any day. S'pose Joe Taurog gits to him fust with the news about Danny? Why, shucks, son, it's jest the break Taurog's been a-waitin' fer!"

"The devil with Taurog!" Steve flared. There was a moment's silence, and then he added in a milder tone: "I appreciate your takin' an interest, Fred, but I've made up my mind. Danny's gonna get a square deal."

The agent waggled his iron-gray head. "Sure," he sighed. "An' I wish you both luck. But it'll be a blamed shame if you lose that contract after all you been through."

STEVE coolly watched him limp back to his little office, then stood for a moment controlled by deep but obscure thoughts. Finally he turned and stared down the single track that twisted away into the midday heat haze of Bonito Valley. He was trying to think how his first meeting with Danny was going to be. Would the kid be changed much?—he wondered. Could anybody be sure that Danny had really learned his lesson?

Yes, there was a great deal of truth in what Fred Yost had just said. This *was* about the worst time for Danny to be coming home. When the kid had been sentenced and shipped down to the pen at Yuma two years ago for his part in that holdup over at Freeport, Steve had been a driver for the Julesburg Stage Line. Now he was both driver and proprietor of his own line, running between Rawhide and Tonto, the copper-mining town twenty-five miles to the north.

Life for Steve had been a pillar-to-post affair ever since he'd started his line. He had invested every cent he owned, plus a sizable chunk he'd borrowed on his little bosky ranch at Dry Ford, in the Concord coach and double span of duns. But two weeks ago he'd signed a tentative agreement with the Bonito & Western Railroad; a contract which, when O. K.'d by the railroad investigator,

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would make him official carrier of mail and passengers from the terminus at Rawhide to the copper pits of Tonto. Steve would have been sitting on top of the world except for one thing: the presence in Rawhide of Joe Taurog. Taurog, a newcomer to the town, had arrived two months ago, and had set up an office in the back room of the Pride Of The Trail Saloon.

Taurog, who had proclaimed himself to be an ex-Wells Fargo manager, had approached Steve the same day he had established his headquarters in the Pride, and had pompously offered to purchase Steve's rig and horses, including the county franchise he held for operating over the Black Rock trail.

Facing Taurog in front of the saloon, Steve had bluntly declared: "My outfit ain't for sale, Taurog. Everything I own's tied up in it, and I aim to operate till my franchise runs out."

Taurog, a six footer with a heavy jaw and a pair of sullen gray eyes, dropped his mask of affability. "I us'ally get what I start out after, Tremper." He stared at Steve for a moment, then added: "An' I happen to savvy about that brother you got servin' time for highway robbery. You better think this over, mister."

"Keep my brother out of this, Taurog . . . . unless you're huntin' for more trouble than you can handle," Steve said flatly.

But afterward, Steve realized that maybe he'd been a little hasty in antagonizing Taurog. He could just as well have stalled the man off until he'd established himself with the railroad and with the people who patronized his line.

Now, standing on the depot platform, Steve felt a queer foreboding. His grim thought was: "It's gonna be tough for Danny . . . and not too good for me!"

The platform began to shake and kept on shaking as the 12:40 train rumbled in from the east. Steve moved forward while the engine and three rattletrap coaches jangled into the station and stopped. Two men stepped down from the rear car. Steve recognized Danny at once, although the kid was a lot thinner than when he'd last seen him. Danny's mouth looked pinched, and his eyes were deep-shadowed and had a dull, burned-out look. There was a big lump in Steve's throat as he hurried forward.

DANNY saw him at that moment, and waited, an awkward grin turning up the corners of his mouth. They shook hands then, and Steve said: "How you been, kid? You sure look fine."

"Oh, I'm all right, Steve," Danny answered him self-consciously. He had no luggage, which left his hands free. Standing there, he shifted from one foot to the other, seeming not to know what to do with them.

"Oh," he said suddenly in a tone that was a bit too loud to sound natural, "I want you to meet Todd Harmonay, gent I got acquainted with on the train this mornin'. Mr. Harmonay, this here's Steve. I was tellin' you about him. Remember?"

Steve looked at the stranger, feeling a sudden, unaccountable dislike for him. The feeling grew more pronounced when Harmonay spoke and held out his hand. "Pleased to meet'cha, Tremper."

Steve gave him a short, hard grip, then turned abruptly back to his brother. "You're ridin' up to the ranch with me, kid."

"Got room in your rig for one more, Tremper?" Harmonay broke

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in. "I'm goin' all the way . . . to Tonto." He was a short, thick-set man, dressed rather flashily in black serge trousers, swallowtail and fancy vest. He regarded Steve casually out of small, colorless eyes.

"Plenty o' room," Steve said shortly. "Fare's two and a half. Get your ticket from Tom Lankerwell at the saloon."

Above the exhaust steam from the decrepit boiler of the locomotive, Fred Yost's high-pitched voice lifted suddenly: "Hey, Steve, you want this express box yet?"

"No," Steve called back, "just hold it till I get the boot loaded, will you, Fred?"

Then Danny Tremper was speaking: "Todd was plannin' on hirin' a buggy at the livery here in town, but I told him all about the stage. Got you another customer, huh?"

Steve grunted. "I've gotta be loadin' up," he said. "Stage leaves in half an hour."

Harmonay said, "All right," and turned to Danny. "Come on over to the saloon, kid: I'll buy you a drink."

"All right." Danny, now more at ease, started forward, but Steve's curt, "Just a second, Danny," halted him and he turned and came back. "I want to see you alone a minute, kid," Steve said.

Danny motioned to Harmonay. "Be right with you."

The two brothers stood a long moment in silence, and then Steve said suddenly: "Who is that hombre, kid? On the level, now."

Danny looked away. "I already told you," he said irritably, "I met him on the train. He got on at Piute Springs." He brought his gaze back reluctantly to his brother's stiff-set face. "Listen, you don't have to worry about me, Steve. I'm through with . . . with what you're thinkin'."

"I sure hope so, kid." Steve's tone was still uneasy, for somehow, he found no reassurance in his brother's words. He added bluntly: "I don't cotton to this Harmonay hombre."

Danny flushed. "You're imaginin' things."

"I'll stand by you, Danny," Steve said earnestly. "All I ask is: play square with me. If anything should happen to . . . well, go wrong, I'd lose everything I've worked for. I'd—"

"Aw, lay off that stuff," Danny said sullenly. "If you don't want to bother with me, then say so."

Steve impetuously put out a hand, gripped his brother's thin shoulder. "I'm sorry, kid. You made your mistake and you paid for it. I won't bring it up again."

Turning, Steve walked toward the pile of baggage on the platform, but when he stooped down to pick up a box and could look under his arm without letting Danny know he was looking, he saw the kid join Todd Harmonay in the middle of the square.

Steve straightened up, suspicion sweeping him. Jaw set, he started loading the boot of the stage, trying to dull his fears with physical action. But a vague feeling of apprehension persisted as he stowed the express box carrying the Yankee pay roll in the boot.

He climbed up finally to the driver's seat and spread the red Hopi blanket out on the left half, ready for Danny. Then, by way of his usual precaution, he checked the load in his Walker pistol and wedged it under the blanket within easy reach. You never could tell. And today he was carrying ten thousand in currency in addition to two sacks of U. S. mail.

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A MOMENT later Steve had reined up the horses in front of the Pride. After that there was the usual excitement incident to the stage's departure, with all the dogs in town barking and the shopkeepers drifting out to the plank walk to see the big coach off. Tom Lankerwell, who owned the Pride, ran out with the two tickets, Todd Harmonay's and a third passenger's. Steve hadn't bothered to find out who the third fare was. Now, suddenly, he had a feeling of wishing that he had.

Steve sat on the high seat, mechanically polishing the silver bands on his new whip, trying to keep his mind on how glad he was that Danny was home. And at that moment he heard the voices on the gallery of the saloon. Turning, he saw Danny. The kid had just come through the swinging doors with another man. And the man was not Todd Harmonay; it was Joe Taurog!

Steve swung down to the ground and headed at a rapid stride for the gallery. He reached it just as Danny and Taurog came down the steps to the walk. Steve touched his brother on the shoulder and when Danny whirled, said quietly: "Get on the stage, kid."

Danny's face came around, startled. Taurog looked at Steve and drawled: "Well, look who's here."

Men were drifting out through the saloon's doors, quiet and watchful. Steve's narrowed gaze angled past Taurog and touched on the rangy shapes of two riders who suddenly moved forward behind the ex-Wells Fargo agent. The men were strangers to Steve, but he knew their kind and read the nature of their profession in the sharp, hard eyes, the whipped-thin length of their stubble-bearded faces.

"Keep away from Danny," he said to Taurog.

A gleam of rancor showed in Taurog's gray eyes. "Don't be givin' me orders," he said threateningly. Moving a step forward, he stopped within arm's reach of Steve. He lifted one big hand, whereupon the two men on the gallery dropped to the walk behind him and halted.

Steve's body shifted. "I'm warnin' you again to stay away from my brother," he said in a low, soft voice.

Joe Taurog laughed. "Danny, your nursemaid's scared," he said and, reaching out, he caught Steve by the shirt. A faster man than his bulk indicated he struck out and hit Steve once in the face, a vicious down-slapping blow that found its mark before Steve could lift his guard.

Taurog drove against Steve, relentlessly carrying him along the walk, hitting him, staggering him, hurling him back. Steve swung with his fists but hit nothing but air. His boots struck the edge of the boardwalk and he went over it in a long, crashing fall, dropping into the dust.

"That's a coyote way to treat a man!" a voice yelled.

Gasping for breath, Steve rolled over and staggered to his feet, hearing the fall of boots on the walk in back of him. He whirled, blind fury sweeping through him, and flung himself at Taurog. But he never reached the man with his fists, for at that instant, Sheriff George McCabe stepped in front of him, blocking his forward rush. The lawman's arm came up and levered him backward on his heels. Then McCabe, a lanky, tough-jawed oldster, was staring at Taurog and Steve.

"Who started this ruckus?" he demanded in a loud voice. Then he fixed Steve with an icy glare. "Tremper, you been gettin' too big fer your pants since you landed that railroad contract."

Steve swayed on his feet. "I didn't

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start anything," he said thickly, and then, as McCabe remained silent, he turned suddenly and walked to the stage. He seized the iron guard rail and pulled himself up to the seat, closing his eyes a moment against the dizziness that swept him.

The crowd began to thin out. Steve drew a deep breath and opened his eyes. Picking Danny out of the blurred scene on the walk, he said: "Come on, kid." He groped for the reins. "All aboard. We're pullin' out." His tone was dead, flat.

Sheriff McCabe's voice broke peremptorily across the silence. "Is that you, Dan Tremper? I want to see you a minute in my office."

Without looking at Steve, Danny moved sullenly after the lawman and entered his little office next door to the saloon. A short moment later, he reappeared, his thin face white.

JOE TAUROG had gone back into the Pride with his two friends, but now the three men came out again and headed deliberately across the square toward Telford's Livery Stable. The crowd had broken up and presently Todd Harmonay sauntered out of the saloon and climbed into the inclosed compartment of the coach. Danny swung along the walk. He started to follow Harmonay into the Concord, but paused at Steve's curt: "Ain't you ridin' up here with me?"

"Naw," Danny said in a surly voice, "I'm ridin' inside with Harmonay."

"What'd McCabe want you for?" Steve demanded.

Danny shrugged. "I gotta report to him once a week," he muttered and whipped himself into the coach without another word.

Steve's mouth tensed. Then the door of the Concord slammed behind Danny, and at the same moment Steve's third passenger came scurrying out of the saloon. He was a middle-aged man with a pale face and a pair of close-set greenish eyes. For a moment he stood by the wheel horse, eying Steve sourly.

"I'll ride up," he said finally and climbed to the high seat beside Steve.

In spite of his preoccupied thoughts, Steve noted the heavy Navy pistol in the man's belt. "I'm Mort Curran," the stranger said. That, and nothing more.

Steve started the horses and the stage high-balled up the street and out of town.

An hour later they reached Piney Knob, which was the relay station and midway point of the trail between Tonto and Rawhide. Pausing

NO FINER DRINK
PURITY...
PEPSI-COLA
IN THE BIG BIG BOTTLE

Bowling — or Biking

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there, Steve sat on the box with his eye on the express chest at his feet while the relay man changed horses. Harmonay stepped from the coach to stretch his legs. Steve noticed that the man had strapped on a gun belt and he commented on it.

Harmonay grinned. "Figured we might chouse a rabbit out of the brush," he said casually. "Good chance to get in a little target practice."

"Better be careful," Steve warned him stiffly. "If you spook these horses on a grade, there'll be no holdin' 'em."

Harmonay shrugged. "Your brother," he said dryly, "tells me you're the best driver in Calexico County. Don't reckon a shot or two'd make you lose control."

The stage rolled on. The land ahead pitched up and down in low, barren hills, and Steve, poised stiffly on the high seat, could look far out across the country. The terrain was ideal cover for road agents working from the huge haystack boulders and jagged hogbacks that rimmed the stage road.

SUDDENLY Mort Curran appeared to grow nervous. He kept staring ahead, kept gripping the hand rail tighter as the Concord rumbled along.

Without taking his gaze from the trail, Steve said: "What's eatin' you, friend?"

Curran gave a quick start but kept his glance anchored on the hills ahead. "Nothin'," he said briefly. "Why?"

"You're actin' jumpy."

"I was thinkin'—" Curran didn't finish, for right then Todd Harmonay's gun roared from the window of the coach below. Grasping the ribbons tight as the horses lunged forward in the traces, Steve yelled: "Harmonay, lay off that stuff!"

Harmonay's answer was to fire again. Suddenly Curran blurted: "What would you do if we was held up, Tremper?"

"Fight," Steve replied tersely.

"You mean . . . you'd shoot it out with 'em?"

"Certainly." Steve eased up on the reins, took his foot off the brake.

Curran jerked his hat brim low over his eyes. "You'd be a fool," he muttered. "They'd pick us off like crows on a barb-wire fence."

They reached Gallows Gap, a steep divide in the solid wall of the Black Rock Hills. The horses sprang to a faster pace under the crack of Steve's long whip. Abruptly, Steve reached down and ran his left hand under the Hopi blanket. The cold touch of his Walker pistol reassured him and for the next quarter of a mile he breathed more easily.

In another twenty minutes they would be sloping down the grade toward Thunder River, and Tonto, ten miles beyond. And then, suddenly, Steve saw what he'd been half expecting for an hour. Off to the left the head and shoulders of a man showed above the rim of a deep dry wash. Dust lifted along the draw, the forewarning of horses coming on at a gallop.

Curran went rigid. "We're gonna be jumped!" he barked out. "Stop the rig!" And then, without warning, he thrust out a hand and grabbed for the reins.

Steve drove his shoulders hard against the man and snatched his pistol from the seat in the same breath. He let go with one shot at the rapidly approaching rider, the spanging echoes ringing in the hot, dusty air.

Curran made another attempt to grab the reins. Abruptly, Steve reached out with the hand that held

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the reins and struck the man twice across the face. He knocked Curran's hat off and brought the muzzle of his gun around.

"Keep your hands off or I'll kill you!" he warned.

At that moment, three riders burst out of the draw ahead and rushed headlong at the stage. Todd Harmonay's gun spoke once from the window of the coach and then his heavy voice lifted: "Pull up, Tremper . . . pull up!"

GRIM-LIPPED, Steve ignored the order. Half-standing on the rolling deck of the Concord, he took snap aim at the nearest rider and fired again. He saw dust fly from the lip of the draw as the bullet missed its mark. Firing lifted all around the coach as the road agents fanned out in front of it. Along the sights of his gun Steve made out the three riders in a kind of whirling blur. They were dressed in rough riding garb with neckerchiefs pulled high beneath slitted eyes. One of the men, the leader, had wide sloping shoulders and a black hat. Joe Taurog!

The Concord thundered forward unchecked through a hail of lead. Steve shot a glance over his shoulder. Taurog and his men were behind now, and trailing the coach at a careful distance. He fired again, but the rolling of the rig spoiled his aim, and he missed.

The coach hit the crown of a grade and started down, the heavy wooden body creaking and groaning as it lurched from side to side. Steve dropped his gun and took a tighter hold on the reins. He scarcely noticed Curran crouched beside him, and it wasn't until he heard the man's snarling voice that he realized he was covered with a gun.

"Stop the rig!" Curran rasped. "Stop it or I'll blow you to bits!"

"You dirty rat!" Steve grated, "go ahead and shoot . . . you'll be bashed to a pulp if this rig hits those rocks down there!" He jerked his head toward the bottom of the grade, now looming before them.

Curran lowered his gun slowly. White-faced, he suddenly grabbed hold of the seat rail with both hands. From below, the voices of Danny and Todd Harmonay lifted stridently. Steve ignored them, ignored everything but the job of keeping the Concord upright on this rocky trail.

Suddenly the coach seemed to drop into space. They were plunging down into the divide, the buttressed walls of the canyon rising sheerly above them, shutting out the daylight. A hundred yards ahead were the boiling white rapids of Thunder River and beside the river the twisting gray ribbon of the Tonto trail. The roar of the stream lifted to Steve, grew momentarily in volume as he fought the madly running horses, boots braced against the low dashboard.

Jamming on the hand brake, he wedged his right boot on the long steel lever. The stage crashed down the grade, rocking dangerously on its straps. They hit the foot of the hill, brake shoes streaming smoke and at that moment Steve caught Curran's furtive movement and threw up a hand to ward off the descending barrel of the man's big .45. He was an instant too slow. The barrel caught him on the temple and he swayed back, clutching at the seat to keep from plunging headlong under the whirling wheels. Blinding white light exploded in his brain—then blackness crashed down.

FIGHTING back to consciousness, Steve found himself huddled on the boot of the stage, his gun still in his hand. The express box con-

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taining the Yankee pay roll was jammed against his ribs. He knew a moment's keen relief; then, pulling himself upright, he saw that the Concord was no longer on the trail. It had come to a halt and was balanced nose down in the middle of Thunder River!

Dazedly, Steve looked down and saw Mort Curran. The man was floundering in the boiling water up to his armpits, fighting his way desperately in the direction of the shore some hundred feet away. Abruptly, Steve realized what must have happened. Curran, in a last grim effort to wreck the stage, had veered the horses down the rocky bank and into the stream. Curran swayed around in the water and when he saw Steve watching him, his Navy pistol arced up. Steve fired. Curran went rigid, then suddenly threw up his hands and plunged face down in the rapids.

Steve swayed, still a little groggy from the blow of Curran's gun barrel. Suddenly a rifle shot smacked from the shore. He felt the hot breath of the bullet whip past his cheek, but not before he had seen Joe Taurog and his two roustabouts moving out cautiously along the river bank.

Taking shelter behind the curved deck of the stage, Steve lifted his gun. As he fired, he saw one of Taurog's men clap a hand to his shoulder. At the same juncture, Todd Harmonay's six-gun spoke from the window of the half-submerged stage and splinters flew from the roof an inch from Steve's face. Bitterness welled up in Steve. Harmonay, trapped inside the coach by the swirling torrent, had tried to shoot him through the roof! Harmonay and Danny were in on this with Joe Taurog! He was certain now!

For a moment, rage blinded Steve; and then he punched out another shot at the outlaws on the bank and saw Taurog's horse sink to its knees and hurl its rider out of the saddle. Taurog struck the ground hard, rolling on and on. His thick body at last piled up against a rock and lay still. Now rifle fire crashed in the canyon as the two remaining outlaws hurled lead at the stage. Harmonay's weapon barked again, and Steve ducked instinctively. Then, suddenly, the outlaws had wheeled their horses and were galloping out of sight down the Tonto trail.

Steve snatched up the reins. Blood was running into his eyes from the cut on his temple and he had to brace himself to keep from falling. He shouted at the horses, trying to make his voice heard above the roar of the rapids. "Come on, Sal! Come on, Spike!" His whip curled out with a vicious snap.

The leaders plunged forward and for a second the coach balanced nose up. Then the wheel horses followed, and the Concord righted itself to an even keel with a rending screech. A moment later the coach had jounced up the bank and lurched to a standstill.

DROPPING the reins, Steve slid weakly to the ground. He fumbled with the gun in his hand, but lost his grip on it. The weapon thudded at his feet. And then Todd Harmonay was climbing out of the stage, whipping his hat against one dripping trouser leg. Behind him, Danny crawled out. Steve, stunned and sick, realized that the kid was grinning at him—a grin of triumph!

Steve staggered toward the horses. Even with his fists clenched his arms trembled. Nausea hit him in the pit of the stomach and he had to lean against Sal's shoulder to keep from

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sliding to the ground.

"O. K., Tremper. Nice work." It was Todd Harmonay speaking.

Danny stood at his side, still grinning. "Sure was, Steve!" he was saying proudly. "Guess you showed 'em what a Tremper can do that time, feller!"

Steve lowered his head over the pole chain, trying to think, trying to figure it out. After a moment he gave up trying and lifted his head to stare at the two "What . . . . how —" He couldn't finish it.

Harmonay was laughing. "Tremper, that was about the wildest ride I ever had. Liked to 'a' drowned in the bargain."

Steve got hold of himself with an effort and said, slowly, loudly, to keep his voice from shaking: "Ain't you workin' with Taurog? You mean to say—"

"Holy smokes, no!" Harmonay interrupted heartily. "But I don't blame you much for thinkin' so. I had your brother primed not to let on who I really was, but he kind o' went a bit too far, I reckon. Made it look like we were both aimin' to jump you for that pay roll."

Steve stared, open-mouthed. "Then . . . then who in blazes—"

Harmonay held out a dripping hand. "I'm the railroad investigator; they sent me up here to get a line on you. Well, I got it all right!"

Steve gulped. "I—" And then words failed him.

"Well, Steve," Danny broke in, grinning, "guess you savvy now I was tellin' the truth when I said I was hittin' the straight an' narrow."

Steve at last gripped Harmonay's outstretched hand. "Yes," he said to Danny, "now I know. And . . . I reckon I owe you an apology . . . . both o' you. I—"

Harmonay cut him off with a wave of the hand. "Forget it, Tremper! But come on! Looks like we got a pair of corpses to tote down to Tonto. And don't forget that pay roll . . . and the mail."

Steve drew a deep breath. "I'm afraid I'm gonna be a little bit behind my schedule this trip. Mr. Harmonay," he said at last, apologetically.

The railroad man gave him a crisp stare. "Don't tell me an hombre like you can't make up this little delay," he said in mock surprise. And then, a sudden twinkle in his gray eyes: "I'm in a powerful hurry, young feller. I gotta see a man about a drink."

THE END.

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Every man in the saloon had his gun out and blazing as a man's body jackknifed over the window sill.

DOCTOR OF VENGEANCE

by Harry F. Olmsted

LENGTHENING shadows ran well ahead of the eastbound traveler who guided his weary mouse-colored mule into notorious Frenchman's Diggings. He rode with a soldierly bearing, this gentleman in plug hat and broadcloth, his long legs hanging, stirrupless, almost to the

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ground. Turning his mount over to the corral roustabout, he came swinging up the dusty street, plainly unwearied and showing little interest in the town's loiterers. If he knew the gold camp's evil reputation for sucking men dry and spitting out their husks, he showed it not at all.

Opposite the Lucky Lode Saloon, he paused, clamped his long, slender bag under his arm and tipped his hat to the staring group under the awning. "Gentlemen, kindly direct me to somebody who can rent me quarters and office room," he requested.

In this soft-voiced stranger men detected dignity and a self-confidence tempered by kindliness. Lowering, dark-visaged Gaston Bienvenu stood forward to regard the questioner with taciturn unfriendliness. Known as the Frenchman, Gaston had discovered these diggings in '49 and had dominated them ever since.

"What fer an office?" he demanded brusquely.

"Allow me to introduce myself, gentlemen. I am Venable Janss, doctor of medicine. You seem to lack a medico and I lack a location. What more natural than our getting together? Being a plain man, I prefer to be known by the shorter Ven Janss."

"Ho! A sawbones!" The Frenchman bellowed with humor. "A pill pusher fer my diggin's, boys. We're gettin' on the map, eh?"

But a slender, blondish man said sourly: "Hear that, Gaston? Vengeance."

"Vengeance . . . yeah." Gaston flashed the speaker an ugly look. "Leave it to Gentleman Jim Redrick to dig the last ace out of a dog-eared deck. Some day you'll dig too deep, feller." He chuckled at the implication, eyed Ven Janss. "Wanta hang up a shingle here, eh? You come to the right man, brother. Come on in an' drink."

They all trooped inside, with many others drifting over to eye the stranger. The smiling medico took his whiskey neat, smacking his lips just as if the stuff was fit to drink. The alcohol loosened his tongue.

"What's wrong with this place?" he demanded. "Even Frisco had to start. I'll be proud to settle here and grow up with the country."

"Right noble sentiment," beamed Gaston. "But who'll you doctor? The miners here is a powerful healthy lot, except fer lead poisonin'."

"And a broken leg now and then," added the medico. "A few cases a week will keep me and my spare time will be spent treating the abused and forgotten Diggers."

He seemed suddenly to have forgotten his listeners and the look on his face was one that might also have transfigured the visages of history's adventurous humanitarians. The saloon crowd laughed at him.

"Injuns?" one man guffawed. "What good is doctorin' them critters? We salt 'em down with bullets, like coyotes . . . the thievin', lousy beggars!"

"They're what the white man has made them," said Ven Janss. "We've victimized them, spread disease among them, stripped them of a noble pride. Improving their health will be the first step in reclaiming them. . . . How about that office?"

"Foller me." Gaston shook with laughter. "I got just the place."

He led the way out, the crowd following. At the outskirts of the settlement a halt was made before a sorry loose stone shack, roofed with

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logs and sod. Weather and disuse had made it a sorry place. The interior was a mess of rat nests and litter from horses which had been stabled there. Light struck through breaks in the walls and roof.

The Frenchman spread his hands, expansively. "Here you are, doc. Best place in town an' rent free." Whereupon he led the crowd back to the Lucky Lode, whooping and joshing. Thus they welcomed the town's first medico—the one they called Doc Vengeance.

A week after his arrival, doc had his abode livable and his sign raised. After that he followed a routine. At nine he bought drinks for the patrons of the Lucky Lode, told stories and cracked jokes. From ten to twelve he waited in vain for patients. His afternoons were spent in "getting acquainted with my red friends," as he put it.

Before long Indians could be seen loitering before his place. Townsmen, passing there, heard the medico talking fluently with them in their own tongue. He treated their ailments, quickly gained their confidence and was repaid with venison, quail and pine nuts. When the Frenchman spoke of sending for wood choppers, to get in the winter wood, Doc Janss persuaded him to hire the Diggers, who fetched in great loads on their skinny little ponies.

One night doc was roused by heavy knocking on his door. He opened to a man who was only a shadow in the moon glow. "No, don't make a light. You Dr. Vengeance?" And when the medico nodded, "Here's a note, amigo. Take eet to Señor Bienvenu. Charge me *por a visita ocupacional* . . . a business call. How much?"

"An ounce of dust. Why don't you deliver the note yourself?"

A chuckle. "Señor, I am ver' busy. Here ees three-four ounce. Thees note mak' you business, because Señor Gaston he get ver' seeck when he read eet. Adios."

He was gone and doc made a light. There was blood on the poke and, shuddering, the medico tossed it under his bunk. Opening the folded missive, he read it and smiled bitterly. His lips were grim when he came to the Lucky Lode, some twenty minutes later. Drunken shouts assailed him as he stood there blinking, his fine clothes in striking contrast to the soiled, faded garb of the miners. From the end of the bar, Gaston hailed him: "*Hoi*, sawbones! We keeping you awake with our noise?"

"Not that." Doc joined him. "This time one of your friends woke me and paid me to deliver this note."

He tendered the missive, and the Frenchman grasped it, puzzled. "Friend? Who—" Bienvenu opened the note, laboriously tracing out the words with a grimy forefinger. Long before he had finished reading, his heavy cheeks were dyed with rage and a low mutter was forming in his thick throat. When he had finished, he tore the note into pieces, hurled them upon the floor and trampled them savagely.

"*Diable!*" he hissed. "Where'd you get this? Who give it to you?"

"It was handed through my doorway by a man I don't know. In the darkness—"

"Only one man?"

"Just one."

The Frenchman's coarse face was contorted and his eyes were writhing. He laid his hand on his gun. "Damn yore soul, doc, if ever I find — Oh, get to blazes out of here! I'm tired of lookin' at you. Git."

Doc Janss bowed with half scorn-

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ful courtesy, turned about and left the saloon. But once out of the light falling through the saloon windows, he broke into a run, swerving hard right and darting to the rear of the Lucky Lode. Here, beyond an open window, five men played in a game dealt by Gentleman Jim Redrick, whose obvious dislike for the medico had never relaxed. Under this window, Doc Janss seated himself. He was barely settled when Gaston Bienvenu came roaring into the card room.

"Get out o' here!" he bawled. "Go out an' down a drink on the house. I want private talk with Gentleman Jim." And when they had hurried out and slammed the door, the Frenchman said: "Jim, you better get your pistols in shape an' do yourself a little practicin'."

"What's this drivel?" demanded the gambler sourly. "My guns are always ready and I'm never out of practice. What ails you? See a ghost?"

"Worse than that, Jim. Ranger Drury Betts has just collected his thousand from the State for killing Gonzalez, the bandit. Now Betts is headed thisaway."

"The great Drury Betts." Gentleman Jim scoffed, but his scorn wasn't entirely convincing, doc thought. "And only a thousand dollars. I'll get him in a game and take that from him in a few hours. Easy come, easy go, you know."

"Don't give me that." The Frenchman seemed almost hysterical. "This is the real thing, Jim. It's right straight from the horse's mouth . . . by way of Diego Montaña, Gonzalez's chief lieutenant. Maybe him an' his bandits won't be glad to nab that feller, after what he done to their chief. It's our only chance, Jim. If Diego doesn't get that ranger—"

Gentleman Jim's chair kicked back and the gambler came up. "You fool! You block-headed fool! Except for me, you'd step into every trap that's set for you. Don't you see; Montaña thinks we've got Barneby Gratt's pothole clean-up. He thinks if he puts the scare to us, we'll rush right out, dig up them nuggets an' carry 'em to some safer spot. What'll you bet Diego ain't got this town watched every minute, with special extra watch for me an' you? Diego hates us, 'cause he believes we tricked him."

The Frenchman growled and doc could hear his heavy breathing. "Ol' Man Know It All himself. Just ain't nothin' but what you savvy it entire an' everybody else is fooled. Well, this time you're way off. I just got a letter from Diego, admittin' what I've held all along. Diego slickered you, when I sent you an' him out to get Barneby Gratt."

"You're crazy! He couldn't have tricked me."

"You're the one that's crazy."

"No, I ain't. Lissen." Gentleman Jim was no gentleman now. "Diego and me, we watched Barneby load his mules that morning, trailed him a mile or so and shot him off his horse. We rode up, stopped the mules an' opened each *aparejo*. None of 'em held anythin' but gravel."

"Must've bin high grade then," snorted Gaston, as they started over the argument for the hundredth time. "Must have been, 'cause Diego's got the Gratt clean-up now."

"Then he's found it," insisted Gentleman Jim. "We panned some of that gravel. It never gave up a color. Diego was as disappointed as I was."

"I should have gone myself," mourned the Frenchman. "Damn that boil on my leg. But if Diego

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is tellin' the truth, he'll turn over two thirds of the Gratt gold for our helpin' him out."

"Helpin'? How?"

"Says Drury Betts will hit the Diggin's some day soon an' for us to play like we're anxious to help him get what he wants. Then one night when we have him in the Lucky Lode, we flash Diego a fire signal an' he'll do the rest."

"Two thirds of the gold for that?" Jim snorted. "It's a trick, I tell you. Diego's word ain't worth a plugged nickel."

"And furthermore," taunted the Frenchman, "he says if it's a deal, just light three small fire signals on top of Bald Mountain. He'll come right down with the money an' trust us to carry out our end of the business. All he wants is that ranger."

But there was little trust in Gentleman Jim. "Whatever would bring Drury Betts up here?" he demanded skeptically.

"Diego covered that, Jim. Sent the ranger a note sayin' Barneby Gratt had been killed an' robbed. Said that if he would come to Frenchman's Diggin's an' sort o' hang around the Lucky Lode, with a red flower in his buttonhole, a feller would give him some vallyble information concernin' the killer. Purty slick, that bandit."

"I still say," insisted the gambler, "why would a famous lawman like Betts concern himself with the killin' of an old coot like Barneby Gratt? That's like shootin' hummin'birds with a .45-90."

"You allus hated Barneby," charged the Frenchman. "An' you never would listen to his yarnin's. You said he was nothin' but a lyin' ol' panhandler. Consequent you missed what everybody heard Barneby brag about, that his neffy, Drury Betts, the sheriff of Monterey, was out after Gonzalez an' he'd get him shore as whiskey's hard. You want to light them signals, or don't you?"

"Let's turn it over in our minds a couple of days," suggested Jim, with less cynicism. "That Diego's plumb tricky. I want to probe his deal for bugs."

The Frenchman grunted a grudging acquiescence and left the card room. Outside, Doc Janss rose and stretched himself, his lips twisted in just the faintest suggestion of a smile.

"Three little fires on Bald Mountain," he murmured, and turned his steps up a slope that climbed from the back of the Diggin's, straight to the high, flat dome of rock which dominated this bend of Melones River.

THE next morning when Doc Janss came down for his usual drink and spell of yarning, he met one of the saloon girls coming back from a walk in the woods. Thin and flat-chested, she seemed faintly exhilarated by her brief tryst with Mother Nature. The fresh breeze had whipped her hair awry and put twin spots of color in her cheeks. A quick response to clean, virile life pulsed in her young yet very old eyes. She carried a ragged bouquet of wild flowers.

"Doc," she cried, at sight of the medico, and there was doglike worship in her eyes as she came close. "I'm nothing, doc," she said shyly, "and you probably won't listen to me. But this place isn't any good for you. I . . . I mean you're too good for it. It will scar you, doc, and give you nothing in return."

"Every place gives something in return for what a man invests," he told her. "But I appreciate your interest, sister."

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She said nothing more, searching his eyes and then drawing a red Indian Paint Brush from her bouquet and threading it through his coat lapel. He tipped his hat and watched her walk to the little box-like cabin where she lived. Then, shaking his head, he entered the Lucky Lode.

The Frenchman stood with a poised glass at the end of his bar. When he saw the little red flower at the medico's lapel, he dropped the drink, muttered: *"Diable!"* and turned into the room behind the bar, where Gentleman Jim lay sleeping.

"Wake up, Jim." Bienvenu shook the sleeping gambler till he sat up, goggle-eyed. "Damnedest thing just happened. A feller just walked into the barroom with a red flower on!"

"Jumpin' Jupiter!" The gambler hit the floor and jerked on his pants. "What's he look like? Does he look fast? Wear one gun or two? Can't have much sense or he'd never have fallen for a sell like this."

"Jim!" Gaston forced calmness into his voice. "Believe it or not, Doc Vengeance is the great California ranger, Drury Betts."

"Doc?" Gentleman Jim groaned, fell back onto the bed and pulled the covers over him, pants and all. "Go 'way," he said disgustedly. "You make me sick."

The Frenchman walked out into the barroom like a man whose convictions have been shattered. Doc Janss grinned at him over a brimming whiskey glass, and that grin infuriated Gaston, snapped his overwrought nerves.

"What in blazes you grinnin' at?" he barked. "What's so funny about me?"

The grin faded and a steely look came into the medico's eyes. "Only thing funny about you, Gaston, is your temper. You're jumpy. What's wrong? You worried about something? Conscience troubling you?"

"None of your business," snapped the king of Frenchman's Diggings. "Just keep your nose out o' my affairs, sawbones, or you'll get it shot off."

"As a matter of fact," said the doctor, unabashed, "I was smiling at the way I got a story for this morning. I was stuck; couldn't think of a thing. Then I met that girl, Blanche, and she pinned this little flower in my buttonhole. That reminded me of the red flower that cost a man his soul but won life for his country. Ever hear that one, boys?"

Gaston Bienvenu knew then that he had erred in his conclusion that Doc Vengeance was the feared ranger who had ended the career of California's ace bandit, Gonzalo Gonzalez. It should have relieved his mind. Instead, it inflamed him with increased fury. He bristled up, his face apoplectic.

"Get out o' my place, you pill-pushin' quack!" he bellowed, and advanced combatively. "I'm tired of seein' your face around here. Get out, before I brain you!" He caught up a half-emptied bottle, hurled it.

Janss ducked and the glass container crashed into the face of a bystander, knocking him cold. The medico smiled patiently, bowed and left the barroom, his boots echoing in the strung silence.

For several seconds following the medico's departure, nobody spoke. Then, with the dry scorn which characterized him, Gentleman Jim Redrick spoke from the door of the living room, behind the bar. "You're the best bet in the world to be wrong in your judgment, Gaston, but sometimes you stumble onto the truth.

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This, I believe, is one of those times. That doctor business never has made sense to me. But Drury Betts, masking as a medico, does. Dr. Vengeance! That's what he'll be if he makes it go. His age is right and he's got the build of Drury Betts. It'll do as a guess, till a better one comes along."

This time it was the Frenchman who scoffed, though not with his usual conviction. He began to drink, paying little attention to anybody. Those denizens of Frenchman's Diggings, each with a good reason for fearing the law, picked up the name of the ranger whose exploits were headlines all over California, and coupled it with Gentleman Jim's statement and Gaston's open worry. A tense, unwonted quiet gripped the town. Men talked softly, and mostly of Drury Betts. He was coming to Frenchman's Diggings! For what? And for whom?

Rumors spread like wildfire. The ranger was coming here for Diego Montaña, once chief lieutenant of Gonzalo Gonzalez and sometime frequenter of barrooms in the Diggings. One story had it that the Frenchman was about to be called to account for somewhere around ten murders, committed over his own bar. Another named Gentleman Jim Redrick—perhaps the Lone High Grader who had preyed on the sluices, at camps across the ridge. Other of the town's shady characters were named. None of the rumors were pointed; none made much sense, but they tautened the nerves of men with uneasy consciences. Waiting became hell.

Nothing more was seen of Dr. Vengeance that day, although the Diggers were moving about his place, as usual. At the fall of night men gathered in the Lucky Lode, drinking heavily and affecting an hysterical attempt at camaraderie. The Frenchman, never speaking, watched their efforts through drunken, bloodshot eyes. Gentleman Jim conducted his game with a nerveless calm. Along about ten o'clock, Gaston reeled over to the gambler. "How 'bout them signal fires, Jim? Think I ought to light 'em?"

"I think so, Gaston. Reckon you can handle it?"

"Why can't I?" barked the Frenchman, squaring his shoulders and stumbling into the night. Gentleman Jim smiled with sly amusement and spun his cards around the board. Not twenty minutes later, sounds of somebody running struck into the barroom. Through the door came a winded and very frightened Mexican placer miner.

"Por mil diablos!" he cried, glancing wildly around the hall. "A tall hombre ees riding 'ere on a beeg black 'orse, amigos. He stop me and say: 'Pablo, where ees that nest of cutthroats call' the Lucky Lode? I, the man who cut off Gonzalo's head, am swear to clean out that place.' And when I tell heem, señores, you he no ride on, I run like the hell to get 'ere before heem. He weel soon be 'ere."

It brought them all up, even Gentleman Jim. A low muttering swept the patrons and hands were laid on guns as they listened for footfalls that didn't come. Instead, almost before the echoes of the Mexican's voice were stilled, a deep, laughing voice spoke from a side window, open to the warm night breeze: "Not coming, you mangy coyotes, but here and firing at you!"

They whirled to the voice, whipping out their guns. A man's shadowy outlines swayed inward through the recess and two dozen guns roared, almost as one. The reckless

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invader doubled in the middle, jack-knifed across the sill and hung there like a dummy, his hands dangling.

"Got him, by Jupiter!" Gentleman Jim's roar filled the Lucky Lode, and he led the rush for the dangling body. They dragged it fully inside, turned it onto its back and recoiled, gasping. "Diego Montaña!" The gambler almost screamed it. "What the hell does this mean?"

What indeed? They looked for Pablo, the Mexican, to question him, but he was gone. Then the door opened and Dr. Vengeance came in, looking as though he had just stepped out of a band box, carrying his black bag.

"Heard the shooting," he explained, "and came right over to do what I can. Just one, eh?"

He walked over to kneel beside the bandit, feeling his pulse, turning back his eyelid. Presently he raised quizzical eyes. "I don't understand, gentlemen. This man has been dead for several hours."

Somebody suggested that Drury Betts had done this, and it set off an explosion of hysteria. With Gentleman Jim leading the way, and Dr. Janss tagging along, a band of aroused and excited men searched everywhere, hoping to turn up the tall man who had ridden a big horse, or at least the Mexican miner who had reported it. By midnight the hunt was over and men returned to the Lucky Lode for a drink. In the saloon they found the Frenchman, pale, shaken and all but done up from his mountain climb.

"There's hell to pay, Jim," he rasped, and choked down another drink. "Somebody's lit three fires up yonder, but the ashes was cold. An' across each pile of ashes was a dead man with a bullet in the head. Three of Diego Montaña's men."

"And while you was findin' that," said Gentleman Jim grimly, "Diego paid us a visit." He told of the dramatic call from the window, the shooting, discovery of the invader's identity, of Doc Janss' judgment that the outlaw had been dead for hours. It took all the starch out of Gaston Bienvenu. "All the luck's agin' us," he mourned. "You reckon that means Drury Betts has got that gold, Jim?"

"What gold?" One of the listening men seized upon the word, and a buzz of curiosity swept the gathering. Gentleman Jim and the Frenchman swapped glances. It would never do to let the boys know they were mixed into the murder of Barneby Gratt, who had enjoyed a certain popularity here.

"Gonzalez's gold," snapped Gentleman Jim. "Any gold them outlaws may have on hand, now that their leader's dead. Gaston, le's go to bed. Everybody out; we're closin'."

When the crowd had left and the barroom lights were out, the two partners faced each other in their living room.

"Gaston," the gambler said slowly, "the gent that killed Montaña, who lit those signal fires an' killed the three men up yonder, who probably has got the Gratt gold right now, was in the Lucky Lode, or outside, listenin' to us while we talked over the letter you got from Diego. Suggest anything?"

"We was alone in the back card room," said the Frenchman dully.

"An' the man that fetched the letter could have been sitting under the open window, just outside, couldn't he?"

Gaston's eyes widened. "Doc Vengeance! Then you think he's—"

"Why not? He wore the red flower, didn't he? I'm checkin' up

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on that Blanche yarn, right now."

Together, they went outside and to the little shack where the percentage girl slept. They entered the place without ceremony and made a light. Gentleman Jim jerked the sleeping girl out of bed, shook her awake.

"Listen, you!" he said roughly. "Did you give that sawbones a red flower? Answer me! Did you?"

Blanche shrank from him, her eyes filled with terror. "No-no, sir," she lied. "I . . . I ain't passin' out bouquets to no man. Now go out and let me sleep."

Gentleman Jim laughed, tossed her back on the bed and dusted off his hands. "I know she never," he said triumphantly. "Now let's go down and boot that smooth sawbones out of his bed, fit a rope to his neck and enjoy a real night's rest." He led the way out and behind him, Blanche stared with agonized eyes.

"Holy mother," she murmured. She leaped from the bed and, pulling on a robe, she sped into the night, hurrying over ground that cut her bare feet cruelly. Breath was heaving from her body when she came to the edge of the settlement. Before she could gain the door of Doc Janss' hovel, an Indian seemed to rise up from out the earth to stop her. Her struggle, her hysterical plea, brought the medico outside. He was fully dressed and he carried his black bag.

"What is it, Blanche?" he asked solicitously.

"It's Gaston Bienvenu and Gentleman Jim!" she gasped. "They're coming to kill you!"

"Kill me? Why, girl?"

"Because of the flower I gave you. They woke me up, asked me if I gave you the red flower. I . . . I thought they were going to beat me, so I . . . . I lied and said no. It was the wrong thing, doctor, because they laughed then and said it was another of your tricks. They said you were Drury Betts and that they were going to kill you. I came to warn you, but you must hurry . . . hurry—"

His hand rested gently on her disheveled hair. "Bless you, girl," he said softly. "I *am* Drury Betts. Take her to a safe place, Meeklu."

The Indian took Blanche's hand and led her away. The ranger faded into the darkness. Presently two figures came sliding to the hovel door, stooped inside. Somewhere a night bird twittered faintly and shadowy figures closed in. A light sprang up on a wick in the shack and a voice, heavy with disappointment, said: "Gone! He ain't here."

"Need medical attention, boys?"

The two men whirled to the tall, straight form standing like a sentinel in the doorway.

"Dr. Vengeance, at your service."

The lid of Janss' black bag was opening and his hand was dipping into it. Only then did Gentleman Jim remember that nobody in Frenchman's Diggings had ever looked into that bag or seen the medico open it.

"You ain't got medicine in there," he charged. "You got a gun."

"Best medicine in the world, at times," Janss said gravely. "Sometimes there is no other treatment indicated, boys. This may be one of those times. As you have no doubt guessed by now, I have recovered most of the loot stolen from Barneby Gratt. There remains only to punish the men who connived to murder the old man. You two may consider yourselves under arrest."

"You're crazy!" rasped the Frenchman. "You ain't got nothin' on us."

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"I had nothing on you," the ranger admitted. "But now I have. You see, of the four men who rode with Diego Montaña . . . answering the three-fire signal . . . only one had sense enough to surrender. He has agreed to become the State's star witness. At daylight, we start for Sacramento to—"

They waited to hear no more. In the chill, steely orbs of this lawman they read a relentlessness that would surely doom them at the end of a hang rope. They didn't look at each other, nor did any signal flash between them, yet they went for their guns at the same instant, so perfectly grooved were their thoughts. They were trained and fast, and they had killed many men between them, but never had they faced a man who laughed as he shot.

Drury Betts spotted them the draw, his flint-hard eyes watching their action, gauging it. His right hand seemed only to flicker as it came from the black bag. The roar of guns beat through the walls and echoed against the hills. Gentleman Jim Redrick, the faster of the pair, was grinning at his certain victory and the grin was still on his face when the ranger's lead struck him. As for the Frenchman, he never saw Drury Betts' gun shift, and his stubborn pride refused to admit that he was struck. But pride is not strength, and as he fell across the jerking body of his partner, he muttered with grisly satisfaction: "Well, you'll never git to hang me, anyway."

Drury Betts stood above them, his gray eyes losing their bleakness and his long body showing its first effect after days of nerve strain. And thus they found him, the men of the town, who came to the scene of the shooting with the flame of battle in their eyes. One man said: "Are you the ranger?" And when he had an affirmative answer: "I allus hoped the law would come to clean out the Diggin's. Now an honest man can sleep sound." And having said that, he turned and hurried away, others with him. The exodus from Frenchman's Diggings was on.

Dawn found the ranger having breakfast with Blanche, in the shack. "And I'll take you down to Monterey and get you a job with a friend of mine, who polishes shells for a big Eastern trade," he told her when he finished his recital. "Clean work with your hands, where you can hold up your head and see the sun playing across the Pacific. You're young enough to forget all of this."

Blanche smiled at him through her tears and turned her glance into the dooryard where Indians loaded scrubby ponies with firewood. "What of them?" she asked. "They will be looked down upon here, despised. Folks won't even buy their wood."

"They are being taken care of," he told her. "Under the wood is the gold stolen from Barneby Gratt's rich pothole. When we get to Oroville, they will be given half of it in food credits. The other half will go to my widowed Aunt Sarah Gratt. My influence, little though it may be, will go toward providing an aim, a healthy outlook for the forgotten Diggers."

For a moment the famous man hunter, who had just slain six men, looked wistfully out into the sunrise. And again his eyes held the dreamy softness of the crusader.

THE END

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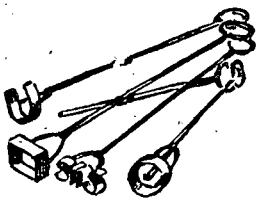
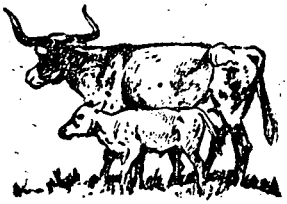
RANGE SAVVY

by Carl Raht

The early cowboy riding the unfenced range was certainly monarch of all he surveyed, and his scepter of kingship was the fire-smudged branding iron he carried strapped to his saddle. There were two kinds of branding tools—the stamp iron and the running iron. The stamp iron is more readily applied for intricate brands. The running iron, linked usually with rustling, is prohibited by law on some ranges, but many honest cowmen employ it exclusively.



In the days of the unfenced range when the cattle of several outfits grazed together, it was an unwritten law that no calf should be branded unless the mother cow was with it, thus proving ownership of the calf by the brand the mother wore. So strictly enforced was this law that sometimes branding work at round-ups was delayed several hours to permit the herd to quiet down and cows to get with their calves.



Rough miners of the gold-rush days of '49 were not always devoid of tact. They put up with a lot of horseplay, rough-housing, and just plain deviltry, and seldom complained if an otherwise harmless gent got drunk and shot up the town. But no camp would countenance plain murder. In the boom towns of Death Valley they had a significant little ceremony for murderers which was the reverse of handing a notable the keys to a town. The better element merely presented the undesirable with a canteen. Sometimes they accompanied him to the edge of town if they feared he wouldn't take the hint. There they filled the canteen, handed it to the criminal in silence, and stood guard over the incoming road to see that he started on the journey away from those parts.

After the San Carlos Apaches were restricted to their reservation along the Gila River, a cattle company was permitted to graze two thousand cattle on the tribal reserve. There were constant clashes between the red man and white. The Indians complained that the company was grazing twelve thousand instead of the permitted two thousand head. The ranchers complained of cattle stealing by the Indians, and the Indians continued to complain of those extra cows that were destroying their grazing range. Finally, after twenty-five years of bickering, the cattle company was expelled from the reservation in 1923. Endeavoring to fight the white man's way, the Indian had gone to the courts for justice—and won his first big battle against the white man!

Mr. Raht will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

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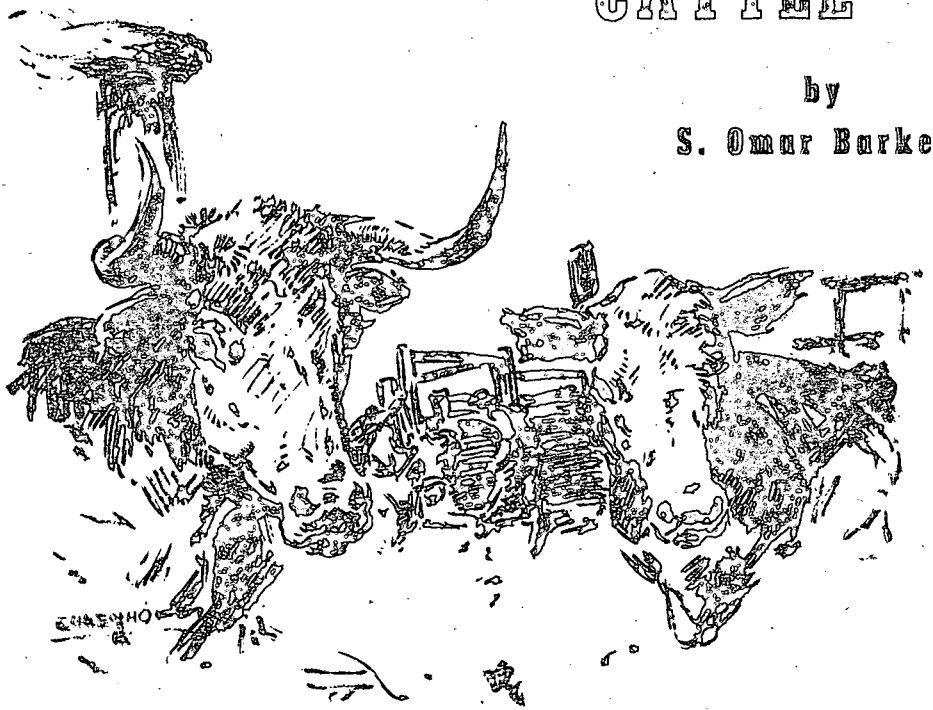
CANT-HOOK CATTLE

by

S. Omar Barker



When beef raisers discovered that "the less horns, the more money," they started making muleys out of their cattle.

ASKED to define a "critter," one old-timer said: "A pair of horns with a steer hitched to the bottom for runnin' gears." Applied to the Texas longhorn, this was just about right. For it's true that the horned cattle whose handling made the cowboy, of necessity, a "mighty tough jigger," were often "more horn than heft." Looked down upon from a hilltop, a herd of them was "a sea of flashing horns," and the clashing of horn against horn in a stampede was a sound like no other ever heard by man.

High tribute to horned cattle has been paid by Berta Hart Nance in the closing lines of her poem, "Cattle":

> Other States were made or born;
> But Texas grew from hide and horn.

So with all the cow-country West. Yet today an annual cowhand job on many and many a Western ranch is "makin' muleys," or "cant hooks"—in other words, dehorning. Why? Well, for one thing, wolves. Once the bovine mother on the range needed her lance-pointed horns to fight with

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in protecting herself and calf from those great gray killers, the lobos. Now, thanks to that ever-ready .30-30 under the cowboy's leg, to free-lance trappers, and to hunters of the various State game departments and the United States Biological Survey, lobos are scarce on most ranges. Coyotes, of course, are still plentiful, but even a "muley" cow can bluff a coyote. Horns, therefore, are no longer much needed for protection.

The purpose of all range cattle raising is to make beef; and as one cowman puts it: "Horns ain't heft." Not only so, but they actually interfere with meat production. Western-raised cattle are often shipped to the Middle West as feeders, there to be corn fattened before going on the block as beef. Now, in some ways, cattle are pretty much like humans. Give a boy a knife and he'll whittle; give him a gun and he'll itch to shoot something with it; give a "critter" horns and it'll hook. Hooking each other away from feed racks is a habit of horned cattle that definitely doesn't help build beef on their bones. Even back in 1889, when buying a batch of steers, a Midwestern feeder paid a cent more per pound for three hundred of them because they had been dehorned. Less horns, more money.

Shipping room is another reason. Trail bosses loading their herds into cattle cars at Abilene or Dodge City in the old days found that six-foot horn spreads took up a lot of space.

Thus today, along with vaccinating against blackleg and other diseases, many a cowhand also takes on the rather messy job of dehorning. Nor is the practice so entirely recent. Back in 1884 a Pueblo, Colorado, outfit dehorned a batch of bulls to keep them from "chousing" several black polled Angus bulls (naturally hornless) which had been brought in to build up the meat quality of the herd. That's probably the earliest record of dehorning in the West.

IN 1885 a farmer stock raiser at Atkinson, Illinois, dehorned a vicious bull to see if it would cure him of his meanness. It did. So the stock raiser promptly dehorned the rest of his herd in the interests of peace and quiet—which he didn't get, right away, at least. For some of his neighbors and the Illinois Humane Society jumped on him with both feet for unnecessary cruelty to animals, and had him arrested.

The case raised such a stir that the trial had to be moved to Geneseo where there was a building big enough to hold the indignant crowds who hankered to see the dehorner punished. The prosecutor argued that God had put horns on kine and therefore must have aimed for them to stay there, only to be answered with the argument that God also created wolves and such for kine to defend themselves against, but now, man having eliminated the wolves, it was also his privilege to eliminate the horns.

Furthermore, witnesses testified that the dehorned cattle almost immediately went to eating, and as the farmer jury knew that animals do not feed when in great pain, they decided that dehorning evidently caused only very temporary distress, like branding, and was therefore not needlessly cruel. So the dehorner was acquitted, and pretty soon others of his neighbors began to try the dehorning remedy on certain old rips that habitually choused other cows off the water or kept the cowpen in a turmoil. It worked. Horn-

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less, the trouble makers tamed right down.

In the late 1880's, various Western ranchmen began experimenting with dehorning, but in some instances they didn't saw the horns off close enough to the skull, and the horns kept on growing. One herd of big steers passed through No Man's Land in 1889 with crazy-looking, gnarled, crooked knobs on their heads, the results of dehorning too far from taw. Then in 1890 a man rigged up a regular dehorning outfit and traveled through the Southwest with it. Some grizzled old longhorn handlers laughed at him some, but others tried it out and were surprised to find how much easier dehorned cattle were to handle.

Up to that time there had been no market for superannuated bulls, but it was discovered that, without horns they, too, could be sold.

FOR dehorning nowadays, cattle are crowded by means of fence wings into a narrow, single-file chute, thence one at a time into a flexible chute called a "squeezer," which presses in on them so firmly, front, rear and sides, that they can barely move. The neck is clamped into a wooden or metal collar very much like the stock in which the Puritans are said to have punished evildoers, and the horns neatly clipped off with a pair of giant clips or dehorners built on the pincers principle. Or in some instances sawed off.

By either method the horn must be cut very close to the skull to prevent regrowth, and therefore considerable blood squirts during the operation. Undoubtedly the critter suffers some pain, even as it does in branding, earmarking, etc. But the "paint man" stands handy with a brush and a bucket of cresote "horn paint" whose application checks bleeding, soothes, disinfects and prevents screw-worm flies from depositing their eggs in the wound. One of the bloodiest sights you'd ever want to see is a wholesale dehorning, yet the dehorned critter often returns to grazing quicker than the branded one.

The plain fact is that a heap of things cowboys have to do to raise and market this nation's supply of beef aren't exactly pussy-cat gentle. That the cowhand recognizes this as well as the next one is suggested in his name for the wielder of dehorning clips, whom he generally calls "the cruel man."

The best, least painful and therefore usual time for dehorning is while the animal is quite young. A yearling's horn is neither very big nor very tough, and the wound heals up faster than on older steers.

There is also on the market a caustic salve which, when applied to the nubs of a calf's horns within a week of its birth, will make it just as much of a "muley" as a "muley" horn. But ranchmen with extensive herds can't afford to hire scores of cowhands to find, rope and doctor every calf within a week of its birth.

Nowadays the principal instances of dehorning grown cattle are when herds are brought in from Mexico. A year or so ago a California outfit made "cant hooks" out of one bunch of 6,300 big Mexican steers (and vaccinated them) at the rate of about one hundred and sixty per hour. Only one pair of dehorners was used, but six men made up the crew. One kept the crowding chute full; one crowded the steer into the squeezer with a board; one levered the squeeze chute open; one wielded the vaccinating needle; one was "the

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cruel man"; and one slopped on the horn paint.

OLD-TIMERS recall that dehorning wasn't always so swift and systematic. Sometimes it was really pretty cruel—on men as well as steers. "It was kind o' hard," one grizzled old rannahan says, "to knock the horns off them old Spanish cows of the brush country with a rock or a club. So what we done, after we got 'em hogtied down, was first to 'ring' 'em. That is, whittle a groove around the base of the horn with a pocketknife, then dally a lass rope purty well out toward the end, hook onto the saddlehorn an' go yander. Gen'rally the horn popped right off, but not always."

Sawing was the usual method before dehorners were invented. But so many saw blades were busted that one ranchman rigged his chute so that a pry pole would force the horn down solid against a beam; then he chopped it off with one hard, swift blow of an ax.

Dehorning on the range, without benefit of chute, was at least a three-man job. After the steer was hogtied, two men, by sitting on opposite ends of a stout pole laid across the steer's neck, would hold his head to the ground while a third man sawed off the upper horn. Then they rolled the critter over and repeated the process for the other horn.

Such methods, fortunately, are no longer necessary, and nobody is gladder of it than the cowboy, who, with few exceptions, heartily dislikes any unnecessary roughness with animals. While dehorning is now common, there are still many thousands of Western cattle shipped to market, horns and all. Other thousands are naturally polled varieties, among them one breed of the well-known Hereford or whiteface.

In any case, though longhorn heritage may still be glimpsed here and there, particularly in the stock of small Spanish-American ranches, those fabulous old-time horn spreads of from six to nine feet—"with a steer hitched on under 'em"—are now to be seen chiefly in the herd preserved as a relic of longhorn days in the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge near Cache, Oklahoma.

While the range-working cowboy of today is still "a mighty tough jigger," thanks no little to his own longhorn heritage and tradition, the cowman's primary job is "buildin' beef"—and "horns ain't heft!"

THE END.

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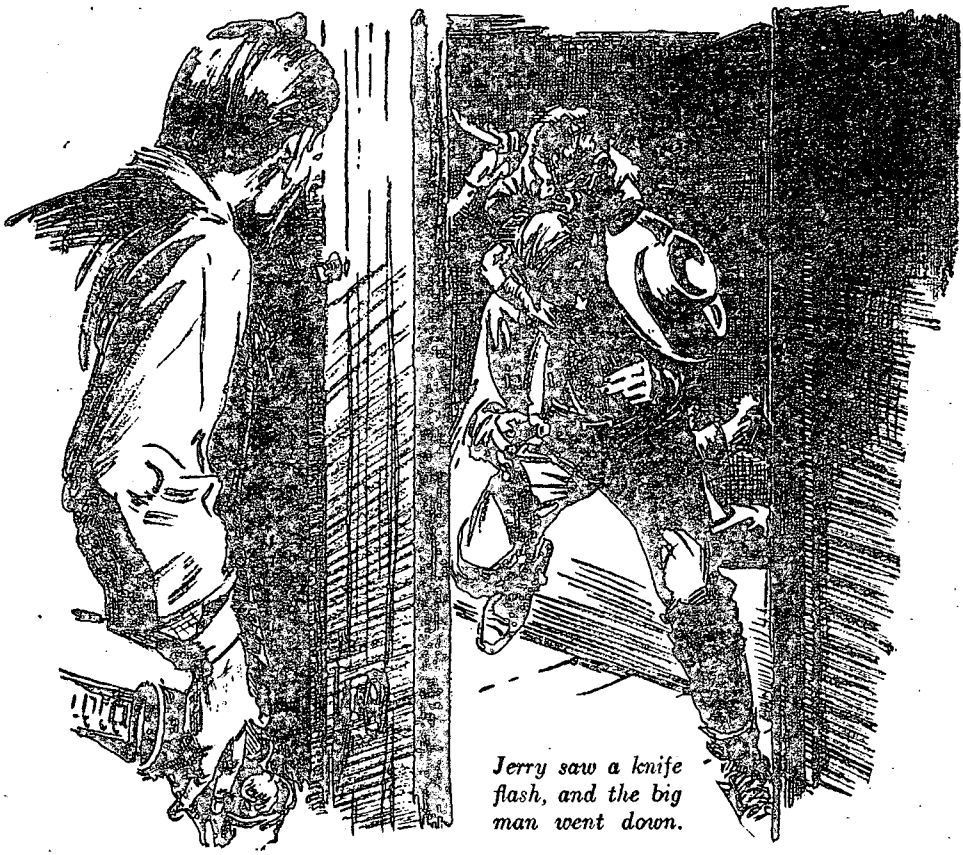

Jerry saw a knife flash, and the big man went down.

GUNPOWDER HEADLINES

by Eric Howard

JERRY CLAYTON stood before the smoldering ruins of the printing plant that housed the Bear Creek *Bugle*. There was little left of the plant itself, but in the rear, a new small shed, built of sheet metal, was still standing.

Jerry strode through the embers to the shed. If the new press in there was undamaged, if there was any paper unburned, he could get out this week's edition of the *Bugle*. A small, wiry old man trotted along behind him.

"Dynamite!" the oldster muttered. "I heard the blast. I tell you the dirty dogs blew it up first, then set it afire. An' as if that wasn't enough, them blamed firemen ruined everything else with water. I was here as quick as I could climb into my clothes, but would they listen to me? No! There was nothin' I could do. It was all over by the time I

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got here. Dynamite—that's what wrecked it. Don't let 'em tell you it was just a fire, started in that ink-soaked waste in back. No, sir! They blew it up."

"All right, Spunky, all right!" Jerry said impatiently. "I heard you. Let's go on from there. Let's see what's left. If we can get out a paper—even one sheet—let's get to it. No use crying over spilled milk—or dynamited ink. Come on!"

"You mean you're goin' on?" demanded Spunky Sharp, the printer who had worked for years past on the *Bugle*. "After this? What with? Why, great Scott, man, not even your uncle could do it! If there's paper left for one edition, if the new press will work, you still haven't got any advertising. You haven't got hardly any subscribers. Man, you'll lose your shirt, your ranch—your life—if you keep this up!"

Jerry Clayton unlocked the padlock and jerked open the door of the shed. Moving inside, he ran his hand over rolls of paper. He looked at the press, which was still crated. He had had to buy that press because his late uncle, who had left him the *Bugle*, had ordered it and the manufacturer wouldn't cancel the order. Jerry smiled grimly. It was just as well.

"We'll knock out one side here for light," he announced, "and we'll get the press set up. The *Bugle* will come out on schedule, Spunky—and this time she'll let out a blast everybody's going to hear."

"They'll stop you one way if they don't another," Spunky argued. "How long can you keep it up?"

"Till I'm through!" retorted Jerry. "And I'm not through yet! Uncle Luke told me to keep the *Bugle* blowing, and I aim to!"

Picking up an ax, he knocked a section of the sheet-metal wall from the framework of the shed. The opening let in a lot of light. Turning, Jerry proceeded to knock the crate apart.

"Look at that press!" he exulted. "There's something for you to work on, Spunky. We'll make this week's paper the best ever. Give me a hand here."

RELUCTANTLY, not sharing his young employer's enthusiasm, Spunky joined in the work. As they were setting up the press, the shadow of a large man appeared in the door.

"Mornin', Jerry," he said unctuously, shaking his head. "I'm sure sorry about the fire. We all did what we could to put it out, but the whole buildin' was a mass o' flames. It's a wonder this shed didn't go, too. What you aim to do now?"

"I aim to get out the paper, Sim," Jerry said. "We've got a press and some paper."

Spunky straightened up and glared at the newcomer, Sim Barton, one of the law's crooked understrappers.

"If you fools hadn't acted like a bunch o' kids playin' firemen," he growled, "you could've saved the plant! But no! You had to play! You still claim you didn't hear the blast o' dynamite that started it?"

A hypocritical smile appeared on Barton's smooth, flat face. There was a peculiar, unpleasant oiliness about the man, and Jerry had discovered he was as slippery as an eel.

"Now, Spunky," Barton said, "nobody heard any such blast. You must've been dreamin'. Or imaginin' things. Last night, Jerry, Spunky was actin' like a crazy man, tryin' to tell us how to fight fire, yellin' about dynamite. Wasn't no dynamite. The fire likely started through his own carelessness, an'

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now he's lookin' for others to blame. I'd have heard it if they was any blast."

"Mebbe you didn't want to hear it!" Spunky growled. "Mebbe a lot of people in this town didn't want to hear it. An' mebbe some others that did hear it are just afraid to open their heads. But I ain't! You can trot right back to Judge Conner an' County Attorney McKee an' Sheriff Goddard an' tell 'em what I say. I say the *Bugle* was dynamited!"

"You're just loco, Spunky," Barton said, smiling, "an' you're talkin' through your hat. You don't want to be accusin' people o' such things. You don't believe that, do you, Jerry?"

Jerry looked Sim Barton in the eye. After a deliberate pause, he said: "We can use dynamite, the same as anybody. You'll find some in the next issue of the *Bugle*, Sim."

"Goin' to try to put out a paper?"

"We'll put it out, all right," Jerry said, and looked past Sim to the fat, carelessly dressed man who had walked up behind him. "Hello, sheriff," he added.

Sheriff Goddard grunted and puffed at his pipe. As usual, he was the picture of unconcern. But his pale, watery-blue eyes took in everything—the new press, the undamaged rolls of paper, Jerry's obvious intention of going on.

"You got any charges to make, Clayton?" he asked, after a pause.

"Charges?" Jerry repeated, and laughed. "What kind of charges?"

Goddard took his pipe from his mouth.

"Sharp, here, has been blowin' off steam," he explained. "Claims he heard an explosion, says the printin' plant was dynamited. I thought you might be accusin' somebody."

The editor and publisher of the Bear Creek *Bugle* looked at the lawman.

"I guess you know I was out at the ranch last night," he said. "The plant was burned in my absence. Spunky seems to be the only one that heard the explosion. He don't know—and I don't know—who blew us up. The other folks around here are all sound sleepers or something. No, I haven't any charges of the kind you might be interested in, sheriff."

"The plant was dynamited!" Spunky repeated.

Goddard ignored him, staring at Jerry Clayton.

"Then I hope you won't go in for any more of them insinuations an' such that you've been puttin' in your paper," he said slowly, with a warning note in his voice. "We'd all like to have a good paper in this town—we need it—but there's no use stirrin' up dissension an' trouble. That didn't do your uncle any good. A man would think that you, as a cowman, would be more interested in buildin' up the community than in tearin' it down."

"That's just what I *am* interested in," Jerry said quietly.

BOTH men, and the others there, recognized the challenge and the conflict behind the words. Jerry's uncle, Luke Clayton, had been a fighting editor who had tried hard to upset the political machine that controlled Bear County—a machine headed by three men, the sheriff, Judge Conner and County Attorney McKee.

The last issue of the paper that Luke Clayton had edited had led to his death. He had placed the paper in the hands of the half a dozen Bear Creek boys who took care of distributing copies for him. Three

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hard cases had stopped the boys, taken all the papers, announcing their intention of dumping them in a canyon. In spite of a crippled leg, old Luke had mounted a horse and pursued them, shooting. He had been thrown, and he died a few days later of injuries to his spine.

The three rowdies had dumped the papers and had left the country. Notified of the accident, Jerry had lost no time in coming to Bear Creek. He had promptly recovered the papers and had seen to their distribution, guarding the boys old Luke had employed. And he had promised his dying uncle to keep the *Bugle* blowing.

Jerry owed a lot to his uncle. Old Luke had brought him up, educated him, given him a start as a rancher. Jerry felt that Luke Clayton had been murdered, but a charge like that could not be proved, and the sheriff claimed he hadn't been able to locate the three hard cases. Spunky asserted that they were hirelings of the three political bosses, and Jerry was sure of that, too. But proving it was another thing.

The war was on now, the war between the *Bugle* and the political machine. Whatever the outcome, Jerry had promised that he would fight it through to a finish.

Sheriff Goddard grunted and left, with Sim Barton trailing along like a well-trained dog. Other men drifted away. Jerry and Spunky got the press in position. Again the old printer protested that Jerry was fighting a losing fight.

"If you're afraid," Jerry told him, "now's your time to quit."

"Why, blast your hide!" exploded Spunky. "The man ain't been born that I'm afraid of!"

Jerry laughed and nodded approvingly. "From now on, nobody's going to get a chance to wreck this place. I'll be here, night and day."

He looked out and saw a strange pair approaching—a neat, small-boned man almost dapper in his appearance, swinging a cane, and a ragged, grinning Mexican boy.

"Ah, my friend," the man greeted Jerry, a little drunkenly, "I find you amid the wreckage of fond hopes. Pedro, bring me yonder box that I may sit down and survey the chaos."

THE Mexican lad sprang into action at the command, steadied the box on the ground and helped his companion to sit down.

"Hello, Con," Jerry said. "How's the legal light this morning? Shining?"

"I come on legal business," explained Con Sutherland. "I understand that few, if any, citizens of Bear Creek, desolate sink of iniquity that it is, heard the explosion last night. I come to give you my affidavit. I suffer from insomnia—my conscience, no doubt. I heard the explosion. What's more, my friend, companion and *mozo*—Pedro, no less—also heard it. Tell him, Pedro."

The boy grinned. "The señor yell at me. 'Pedro,' he say, 'what ees that noise? Has the leed come off of hell? Go!' I go. Thees place, she ees blow up. She ees burning. A man, she ees running away. Me, I follow. Thees hombre goes to the jail, to the back door. Inside."

"Who was it?" Jerry demanded. "What did he look like?"

"I don' see heem good. He ees bent over, he runs."

"Regardless of that," said Con Sutherland, "you may now have my affidavit, and Pedro's, to the effect that your establishment was dynamited, that the man who blew it up was seen running to the jail, and that he went inside. I need not

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point out the obvious conclusion."

"No," said Jerry. "He had done his work. He was reporting to his boss." He reached for some paper. "Draw up the affidavits, Con. I'll keep them, but I won't publish them. I don't want you mixed up in this. I'll just use the information as a basis to work on."

"Sir," the lawyer declared pompously, "you do me less than justice. I am a man unafraid. Let my words be blazoned forth. I accuse—" He broke off and began to cough. Pedro solicitously patted him on the back as he bent over. Sutherland pulled a flask from his pocket and took a drink. "Purely medicinal," he murmured.

It took him a long time to write out the affidavits. At last he handed them to Jerry. Then he rose and said: "At your service, sir. Pedro, to the office."

Sutherland walked away, swinging his cane, upon which he obviously depended for support. The boy followed at his heels. Jerry watched the strange pair thoughtfully, remembering all his uncle had told him about the lawyer. Con Sutherland came of a distinguished family of soldiers and professional men; an uncle had been governor of the State. Con himself had been a successful city lawyer, with a large practice, with a brilliant future. During the most important trial he had ever appeared in, defending one of his best friends on a murder charge, he had been drunk and incompetent. His friend had died on the gallows, and there were still many who claimed he was innocent. After that Con Sutherland had disappeared, eventually landing in Bear Creek. Eloquent and sardonic, filled with bitter self-contempt, he was still a man of courage and kindness.

"Funny," remarked Spunky, "how that kid Pedro sticks to Sutherland an' looks after him."

"Not funny at all," Jerry retorted. "Con saved Pedro from a noose. They had the kid framed for a killing he wasn't even near. He's been Con's slave ever since. What's more, he'd die for him—which may be why nobody's tried to shut Con up lately."

"That feller that ducked into the jail, the way the kid said," Spunky observed. "You know what, Jerry? That could be that hard-rock man that ran amok up at the dam an' crippled three men. It wouldn't be the first time Sheriff Goddard has used a pris'ner to do his dirty work."

"Yeah, I was thinking that. He's got a ready-made alibi. Locked up in a cell, how could he get out to do anything? And that fellow can handle powder. If that's it, see what it means. Our friends are trying to hold up dam construction because that engineer wouldn't pass the cement they had. Let's get the press rolling, Spunky. We've got a paper to get out."

THE *Bugle,* consisting of only one page, printed on both sides, came out on schedule. There was no advertising; the merchants of Bear Creek had been told not to advertise in the paper. The front page told the story of the explosion that had wrecked the plant. It stated that the editor had affidavits from responsible citizens who had heard the blast and from one man who had seen the dynamiter fleeing from the scene of his crime. Then there was a brief editorial appeal to all good citizens to awake and throw off bad government. It ended with the assertion that the *Bugle* would continue publication, that its enemies could not destroy it. It invited

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them, challenged them, to come into the open and fight like men. There was another story, too, about delays in the dam construction that meant so much to the country. What caused these delays? Who was responsible for them? What was their purpose?

The back of the page was filled with innocuous personal items and news from other parts of the State.

Armed, Jerry summoned the town boys to distribute the papers. He saw to it that they reached his few subscribers and everyone else. Men stood in small groups, on the street, quietly reading and discussing what he had written. The whole town was under tension.

Spunky had lost none of his pessimism. Shaking his head, he said, "It's your play, Jerry. But I wouldn't be surprised if Goddard let that pris'ner o' his out again to get you. Or if the three hombres that tackled Luke come back. That feller in jail, Mack Kidder, is in their pay; you can bet on that."

"I reckon," agreed Jerry. "Go on home, Spunky. I'll stay here tonight."

"But will you be here in the mornin'?" Spunky inquired blandly.

"I aim to be."

Alone, Jerry made a small fire in the open lot. He had purchased some supplies during the afternoon. Now he cooked a simple meal, the sort he had often prepared out on the range. As he sat on his heels, drinking black coffee, he wondered if he was a fool, or was just stubborn? If he had given up, letting the paper die, he could have done all right with his cow outfit. Now, unless he could beat Goddard, Conner and McKee and all the men they controlled, he knew they'd break him.

The trouble was, they wouldn't fight in the open. They'd hire others to do their fighting. They'd stay in the background, smug and hypocritical, pretending to be honest lawmen, when everyone who knew anything knew they were running the county for themselves. Only a month ago, Judge Conner had rendered a decision that put thousands of dollars in their pockets.

And if Jerry tackled the gunmen they sent after him, the chances were they'd arrest him—and frame him! With McKee prosecuting, Conner on the bench, and a hand-picked jury, Jerry wouldn't have a chance. Con Sutherland would probably be too drunk to defend him. But even if Con stayed sober for the occasion, Jerry wouldn't be able to clear himself.

"If I could get 'em in the open!" Jerry muttered. "If I could get the goods on 'em!"

HE tossed away the dregs of his coffee and stood up as he saw Con Sutherland coming toward him, followed as always by Pedro.

"My friend," Sutherland began in his usual pompous way, "you have aroused the ire of certain leading citizens. They have interrogated me, thinking that I perhaps gave you an affidavit to the effect that I had heard the explosion."

"What did you say?"

"Say? Nothing. Not a word. I merely quoted Shakespeare. Having no appreciation for literature, they left me, saying I was drunk. But now, at this moment, the unholy three, sir, are dining at the home of Conner—that same illiterate Conner who calls himself a judge! And I have it directly from Pedro, who in turn has it from Maria, his cousin, who is employed by the said judge, that they are resolved the *Bugle* will not appear again. In fact, sir, they

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mean this time to destroy it utterly. Should you stand and fight, you will go down with your ship."

"When will this all happen?"

"Tonight, my friend, at the witching hour—or later. What's more, we further depose that one Mack Kidder, now a prisoner in the county jail, whom I interviewed in quest of a client, announced to me that he didn't need a lawyer, and further stated that he had the run of the jail. 'This here,' he said, 'is just a hotel to me.' His very words. You may expect, I believe, a visit from Mr. Kidder ere the dawn breaks again."

"I had that figured out." Jerry nodded. "Thanks, Con. We'll see what happens."

"You intend to remain here? Then, by the sword of my grandfather, I shall stand at your side!"

Jerry laughed. "No, Con. You go home. I may need you to defend me—if I kill somebody and Goddard arrests me for murder. Say, have I got a legal right to shoot anybody that busts into my shed here?"

"Yes and no," answered Sutherland. "If you're inside, if it houses your dwelling or your business, if someone breaks in with felonious intent, you may shoot him. However, since the shed is open to the elements, and you are outside, one who entered might be a stray wanderer innocently in search of shelter. Should you shoot him, our friends Goddard, McKee and Conner would make the most of it."

"Sure," Jerry said. "I figured that, too. Good night, Con."

"Good night."

As they walked away, Pedro said: "*Buenas noches, señor.*"

IT was after midnight and the whole town had quieted down before Jerry spread his bedroll inside the shed. He lay down, but not to sleep. He knew that he had to re-

RAWHIDIN' RENEGADES ROARED VENGEANCE

—clashing with the grim song of young KING KOLT'S six-guns. For his enemies were GUNMEN OF DEVIL'S GARDEN—a great complete novel by Paul S. Powers in the August 1st issue . . . plus WOLF TRACKS WEST, a smashing novelette by Hal Dunning.

Border Patrolman Tommy Rockford faced more than dry-gulch death to meet the challenge of LONE STAR LOOT, by Walker Tompkins, in the August 8th issue. Also a great novelette of the OKLAHOMA KID, by Lee Bond.

Lightning-fast and poker-faced Rowdy Lang wanted to leave the owlhoot trails, so he staked himself to a BOOTHILL HOMESTEAD that involved even more menace and mystery. A complete novel by James P. Webb heading the August 15th issue. And many other thrilling yarns of the wide open spaces in every number of

WILD WEST

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main on guard. And he was trying to think of some way of bringing the three bosses of the county into the open, of proving their guilt.

He tensed as he heard a board snap. Someone was approaching the shed. Jerry pulled his knees up, got to his feet. Keeping in the dark, he inched the door open, looked out. After a moment he made out a hulking shadow, bent over, moving forward.

Jerry's right hand went down to his gun. But something surprising, startling, happened just then.

Another figure, smaller, moving fast, sprang out of the shadows and landed on the big man's back. There was a very brief struggle. The big man grunted and went down on all fours. The smaller one leaped lightly aside. The big man rolled over and lay still while the slender one disappeared fleetly into the darkness.

"Come back here!" Jerry commanded.

But the other had gone.

Jerry edged through the door, then quickly retreated. Another big man was approaching, casting a grotesque shadow. This one Jerry recognized from his peculiar, shuffling walk and habit of carrying one shoulder higher than the other. It was Sim Barton.

"Mack!" Barton whispered hoarsely. "Mack, who was it? What's happened? Mack!"

The man on the ground did not answer. Sim moved closer to him, knelt down and ran his hand over him.

Barton jerked back. "Blood! Stabbed!" he muttered. "Mack, you —" He got awkwardly to his feet. "Dead, damn if he ain't. Stabbed to death."

Frightened, Barton backed away. Suddenly he let out a high-pitched squeal.

Jerry, circling him, had stepped up behind him. He got his left arm around Sim's neck and pressed his gun into the man's back.

"Take it easy, Sim," he said. "Your friend Mack Kidder must've busted jail. What happened to him?"

Half choked, Sim spluttered: "You killed him! You stabbed him in the back. Wait till the sheriff—"

Jerry increased the pressure on Barton's throat, choking off his words. As Sim slumped weakly, gasping for air, Jerry suddenly released him and drove a powerful left to his chin. Sim crumpled and fell.

"Just lay there a minute," Jerry told him, "while I look Mack over."

He ran his hands over the man on the ground and swore.

"Dynamite!" he muttered. "Two sticks, fused and ready. He aimed to blow me to pieces—the same as he blew up the *Bugle* last night. And then sneak back to his cell in his private hotel!"

Sim Barton was moving, groaning. And Jerry heard men in the distance, running in that direction. Turning, he seized Barton by the shoulders and dragged him back of the shed. He managed to get him on his feet and gave his face stinging, smarting blows that revived him.

As the running men neared the place, Jerry demanded in a whisper: "Where are they now? Where's Goddard and Conner and McKee? You lead me to 'em or I'll give you what Kidder got!"

"At Conner's," gasped Barton. "They're—"

"Move, then!" Jerry said, thrusting his gun into Sim's back.

He forced the big, shambling man into a dog trot, picking a way

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through dark alleys. Behind him he heard the shouts of the men who had reached the shed and found Kidder.

"There he goes!" someone yelled. "Get the slippery devil!" Then they pounded off in the opposite direction.

Jerry had time to mutter to himself: "Spunky, you shouldn't have done it! It's my fight!"

But he put that thought out of his mind as they came within sight of Judge Conner's big house. He checked Sim's run by clamping a hand on the man's shoulder. There was a porch across the front of the house, along one side. A room at the side of the house was lighted.

They were in there, then—slovenly Goddard, smooth, oily McKee with his fox eyes, and Conner, with the manner of a preacher. There they waited for Mack Kidder's report, for news that he had blasted the *Bugle* and its owner to kingdom come.

Jerry felt a cold rage. Shooting was too good for sidewinders like them. He forced Sim forward. As the two of them went up the side steps to the porch, Jerry heard cold, mirthless laughter from the men inside. The tone of it made his rage even greater.

He rushed Sim Barton, striking him powerfully with his shoulder. Retreating and falling, Sim landed against a window, shattered it and half fell into the room.

THE men inside leaped to their feet. Goddard clawed at his gun while McKee, the youngest and quickest, ducked behind a table.

Jerry stepped close to the window, gun drawn.

"Hold it, sheriff," he said. "I'm claimin' you let Kidder out o' jail, supplied him with dynamite and sent him to blow me up. I'm claiming you were all waiting here for him to report. I ought to shoot you down like dogs."

"Shoot them, Jerry! Kill the mangy curs, the spawn of the devil! Rid the country of the—"

Jerry stiffened. That had been Con Sutherland speaking. He was on the floor. McKee was behind him, and McKee's fist had stopped his words.

Now McKee spoke. "One move out of you, Clayton, and Sutherland is a goner. Put up your gun and come in here. We'll talk this over. You can't prove that crazy dynamite story any more than you can prove the other wild ones you've been printing in your little yellow sheet. If you use your head and sign a statement, admitting all the lies you've spread, we might go easy on you. We might let you retire to your ranch and enjoy life. You could take this drunken bum with you."

"Kill them!" Sutherland cried. "Never mind me! Shoot the loathesome vipers—"

Again McKee's fist stopped him.

Gun at his side, Jerry climbed in through the window. He stood there, looking at Goddard, at Conner, at McKee's taunting face just back of Con Sutherland. He saw that McKee had his gun in Sutherland's back.

"Let him go," Jerry said flatly. "Let Con go."

McKee smiled. "When you've signed the paper we want. Get it ready, judge. We'll take over the *Bugle*, Clayton."

Jerry stared into the cold eyes of the county attorney. He knew McKee well enough to realize the man would do just what he said; he'd kill Con Sutherland.

Jerry knew he was licked. He

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holstered his gun and nodded slowly.

"Fix up your paper," he said.

"No!" Sutherland protested.

Judge Conner put on his spectacles, pulled his chair up to a table and sat down. Goddard watched Jerry closely.

The judge's pen scratched across paper. That was the only sound that disturbed the tense quiet of the room.

Jerry had time to think, grimly, that if he signed the paper, if he turned over the *Bugle*, he would lose the respect of every man in the country. But he couldn't let Con be killed.

After a few minutes, there was a knock on the door of the room.

"Señor Judge," a woman said, "I breeng the dreenks."

The door opened and Maria, Pedro's cousin, came in carrying a tray. Her eyes were wide and frightened as she set the tray down; she retreated swiftly, leaving the door open.

The judge lifted the paper and began to read in a dull, heavy tone. As Jerry listened his eyes burned and his face darkened. Goddard and McKee laughed.

"Don't sign it!" Sutherland begged. "Not for me, Jerry. I'm . . . through . . . anyway."

He got the words out in spite of McKee's hold on him. McKee was having a time to subdue him, although he had one arm around Con's neck. The lawyer seemed suddenly charged with new energy.

AT that moment a light, swift form leaped into the room, straight for McKee. A knife glistened briefly.

Jerry clutched his gun, jerked it out, and swung it in a wide arc. It crashed against the judge's head, then leveled at the sheriff.

Two guns roared at once. Goddard's and Jerry's.

Jerry felt nothing, but he knew he was hit in the left shoulder. He stared at the slovenly sheriff, who had fallen over and looked now like a bundle of old clothes.

Sim Barton made a dive for the window, but Jerry tripped him and he sprawled.

Jerry swung around then. Pedro was helping Con Sutherland to his feet. McKee lay on the floor, motionless.

"They say they weel keel you, señor," Pedro told Con. "I am go loco. I can theenk of *nada*. I am running like a crazy wolf. I see thees hombre go to dynamite Señor Clayton and I jump heem. See, here ees the dynamite! Let us blow thees house up, no?"

"So it was you, Pedro," Jerry said. "I thought mebbe Spunky— There's a mob coming, Con . . . on the run. Maybe enough of their followers to—"

"Get hold of the judge!" Sutherland said. "He's always been the weak link. We'll break him. You, Pedro, hang on to that dynamite, but don't use it! It's evidence! Jerry, my boy, I'm cold sober and I'm going to make the speech of my life!"

Snatching the lamp from the table, Sutherland stepped through the window to the porch.

"Citizens!" he called, holding the lamp high. "In all the turbulent history of Bear Creek, there has been no night like this! Here in my hand I hold aloft the light of liberty . . . liberty for all who felt the cruel, rapacious heel of a merciless and corrupt political machine. That heel, citizens, is like Achilles'— vulnerable! The evil rule of the greedy is now ended. You who

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cringed may now stand erect. You who paid tribute may now keep your honest gains. Citizens, the foul gang that has so long dominated our fair city and our far-flung county is finished, once and for all."

There was a loud cheer, a few boos.

"Citizens, be vigilant!" Con shouted. "There among you may be some of those still loyal to the marauders. Watch them! Sheriff Goddard is no longer in office. County Attorney McKee has likewise resigned. Judge Conner, a broken man, is even now pouring out the long tale of his crimes and misdemeanors into the ears of Jerry Clayton, owner and publisher of the Bear Creek *Bugle!* He is admitting that he, McKee and Goddard conspired to end the glorious career of the *Bugle*, that they did, in fact, employ one Mack Kidder to dynamite the plant, and that tonight they sent Kidder to kill Jerry Clayton!"

THERE was a disturbance in the crowd. It parted. Three men were being marched forward by the diminutive Spunky Sharp who carried a double-barreled shotgun.

"Yeah!" called the printer. "An' here are the three gents that caused the death of old Luke Clayton! March, you killers!"

"Citizens!" Con went on. "Pending the reorganization of our civic affairs, I call on you to maintain law and order. I suggest the formation of a committee for that purpose. Let me name—"

He was interrupted by a loud shout.

"Con Sutherland!" someone called. "I name him as chairman of the committee!"

"And Jerry Clayton!" another added.

"And Spunky Sharp! There you have it, gents—a committee o' three men big enough an' brave enough to stand up agin' the others."

Jerry appeared on the porch, thrusting Judge Conner before him. The judge, obviously terrified, stood shaking in the glow of the lamp. The crowd yelled and jeered, and Conner cringed, leaning against Jerry.

"D-don't let 'em hang me!" he pleaded.

"No, sir!" Jerry assured him. "I wouldn't like that, either. I'm going to see you get a chance to rot in jail."

"Three cheers for Sutherland, Clayton and Sharp!" someone cried.

Con saw Pedro and beckoned to him. He pulled the Mexican into the light and put his hand on his shoulder.

"Citizens of Bear Creek!" he said, as the cheers died down. "Give a cheer for Pedro, without whose loyal help and great courage this night might have come to another end!"

They cheered. Pedro ducked his head and grinned. Nervously, then, he turned to his patron.

"I weel get the rope, no?" he whispered. "For theese theengs I 'ave done?"

"*Silencio, tonto!*" Con said, in the authoritative tone that Pedro admired. "You will get nothing, nothing but the accolade of courage."

"*Es bueno?*" Pedro asked hopefully.

"There is nothing better," declared Con.

The next issue of the *Bugle* was full-sized. It had to be to accommodate the ads that poured in. And it had to be a large issue, too, because everybody in Bear County was a subscriber now.

THE END.

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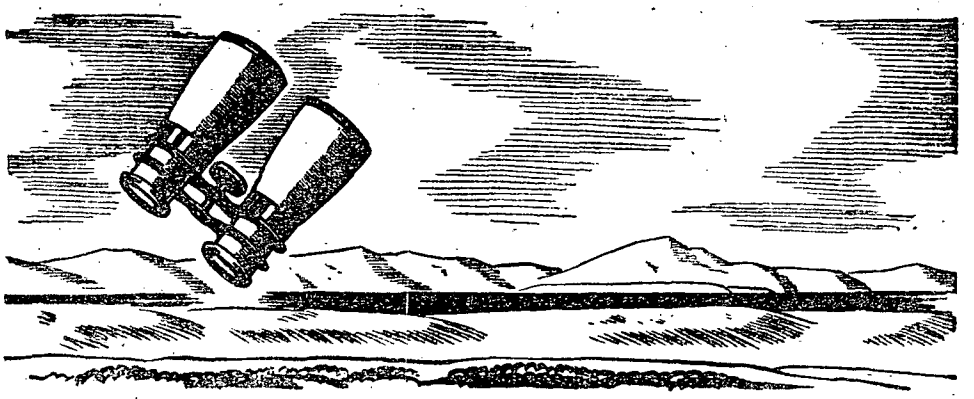

Missing Department

DENNY, LAURA, MYRTLE, HARRY and GRACE—About 1917 or 1918 this family came to Yell County, Arkansas, from some place in Kansas. They remained in Arkansas for two or three years, and after moving from there finally settled in Salt Lake City, Utah. They have not been heard from since the time of Mr. Denny's death, about ten years ago. It would be to their advantage, perhaps, if they would get in touch with me, so if anyone knows their whereabouts, tell them to contact me, or let me know where they are and I will get in touch with them.—J. H. Davis, Norman, Arkansas

THOMAS, MELBA—She is the daughter of George and Eva Thomas and is between thirty-five and forty years old. In 1919 I received one letter from her and my uncle, her father, sent from Cincinnati, Ohio. I answered it but received no reply, and from that time on have been unable to locate her or her parents. If anyone knows her whereabouts or has any information about her mother and father, I would greatly appreciate hearing from them.—Joseph J. Thomas, Mgr., Alaska-Rand Mine, Hawk Inlet, Alaska

COOKE, MRS. MARY STORY—She is my daughter. Left home April 2, 1941. When last heard from in May, 1941, she was in Phenix City, Alabama. We believe she may be with her husband, W. Ted Cooke, whose home is in Columbus, Georgia. She is seventeen years old, has blond hair, a fair complexion, is five feet tall, and weighs about 105 pounds. Has a thumb and two fingers on right hand; the other fingers are missing. If anyone has any information concerning her present whereabouts, please get in touch with me.—Tech. Sgt. Guy H. Story, c/o Missing Department, Western Story

GRANDY, BEN E.—He is my brother and has not been heard from since the spring of 1934, at which time he was in Denver, Colorado, but expected to go to Los Angeles. He is seventy years old, about five feet eight inches tall, and quite heavy-set. If anyone knows his whereabouts or has any information concerning him, please write to me.—Mrs. Minnie H. Cliff, Box 611, Austin, Pennsylvania

MILLIGAN, EMALINE—She is my grandmother, whom I have not seen since I was a baby. I have very little information about her except that she must be over seventy years of age, used to live in Missouri, and at the time of my father's death, in 1927, was in Texas. My grandfather on my father's side was A. C. Milligan. If anyone knows her whereabouts, please get in touch with me.—Mrs. Willola Letha Wininger, Route No. 2, Box 294, Escondido, California

There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

While it will be better to use your name in the notices, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to anyone who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

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The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

It looks like the old Hollow Tree will soon have quite a following with the students at St. Peter's School way down in Chile, South America. Our letter from Jack Foden is the sixth or seventh we've published in recent months, and we can imagine quite a bit of competition springing up among these lads to see who gets the most replies. We never were the ones to take sides—one pal agin' the other—so our advice is to write to all of them and help yourselves to a lot of first-hand information on that fabulous land of beauty—South America.

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am writing this letter in the hopes I'll see it in print in the Hollow Tree of Western Story magazine. I am sixteen years old and wish to correspond with girls of my age. Everybody who writes will sure get an answer, so just send me a line and you'll get to know a lot about Chile.—Jack Foden, St. Peter's School, Villa Alemana, Chile, South America

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Jeanne's a Western Story fan—

Dear Miss Rivers:

My hobby is writing letters and I would like to hear from every member of the Hollow Tree. I'll do my best to answer all letters. I am twenty years old and like all sports. I can tell many interesting things about our east Tennessee mountains. I must say Western Story can't be beat.—Jeanne Witt, Epperson, Tennessee

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Boys, redeem yourselves—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Make this pal happy by pouring mail into my mailbox. I would like to have lots of pals who are interested in the following hobbies: collecting butterflies, moths, stamps, mountain ballads and Western songs, and trading snapshots. I would prefer to hear from girls between eighteen and twenty-three years of age because girls, so far, have answered my letters better than boys, but if the boys care to write, I will be more than happy to answer their letters. I will also furnish the postage for our correspondence.—Byron Mason, Jr., 315 Holland Street, Hancock, Michigan

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Stephanie wields a mean baton—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Have you room in your Hollow Tree for a seventeen-year-old brown-eyed blonde? I am a drum majorette and love all outdoor sports. My favorites are: figure skating, skiing, swimming and diving. How about filling my mailbox? I promise to answer all letters.—Stephanie Lys, Prospect Street, Hinsdale, New Hampshire

---

Carl's a six-footer—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a country lad lonesome for friends and would like to join your Hollow Tree. I am eighteen years old and have brown hair and blue eyes and am one inch over six feet tall. I like to write letters and promise to answer every one sent my way.—Carl Allwardt, Princeville, Illinois

---

Waldo wants scenic post cards—

Dear Miss Rivers:

There seems to be quite a number of post-card collectors writing to the Hollow Tree, so perhaps I can get in touch with some of them if I have the luck to have this letter printed. I have been collecting mostly foreign cards, but mail from foreign parts is practically at a standstill now, so I would like cards from all parts of this country—scenery, landscapes, mountains, trees, parks, et cetera. I don't care much for buildings unless they have some historical association. I am particularly anxious to have cards from the Rocky Mountain States, but will be glad to exchange with anyone anywhere.—Waldo Marsh, 528 Cypress, Kansas City, Missouri

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*Happy birthday, Guss—a bit late—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I have been a constant reader of Western Story for many years and think it is the best magazine published. In all these years this is my first letter to the Hollow Tree, so please print my plea. July 17th is my birthday, and I'm asking everyone who reads this letter, man or woman, regardless of age, to send me a scenic post card for a present. I'd like to have one from every State in the Union. I have just recently been dismissed from the hospital and I cannot get outdoors to enjoy life like others. I have always loved the great open spaces, and when feeling well spend many hours in the woods and on the prairie, and my hobby is cultivating flowers. Come on, pals, send me a post card and make my birthday a happy one. —Guss Y. Allen, 117 Texas Avenue, Woodward, Oklahoma

Who can assist this pal?

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a widow and have to do something to support myself and have taken up writing song poems and I would like to get in touch with someone who can set them to music. Want to work on a royalty basis. Hope someone can help me out.—Mrs. Roberta Walton, 824 Patterson Avenue, S. W., Roanoke, Virginia

Introducing a very young member—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Is there room for me in the Hollow Tree? I am twelve years old and quite lonesome. I have red hair, hazel eyes, am five feet tall and weigh 105 pounds. I love all outdoor sports and would like to hear from everyone everywhere, so please drop me a line. I will answer all letters that come my way.—Janice Entwistle, Rice, Washington

Lewis is doing his part—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Maybe you can find room to print my request for Pen Pals. I am a native of New York City and find I am lonesome here in Massachusetts. I work in a defense plant at night and don't have much time to get out and make friends. I would like to hear from everyone from eighteen years up and will try to write an interesting answer to each and everyone.—Lewis Nightingale, Charty Hotel, Springfield, Massachusetts

How about a cure for lonesomeness?

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a widow and rather lonely, and would like very much to have some Pen Pals. I am sixty years old, but much younger-looking and people are as young as they look and feel, anyway. I weigh 112 pounds and am five feet tall and have brown eyes and gray hair. I love music, good shows, birds, flowers and everything in nature. I will be happy to answer any letters I may receive, so come on, Pen Pals, let's get busy and write.—Mrs. L. M. Rader, 2015 N. Henderson, Dallas, Texas

*Editorial note: This letter did not arrive in time to be printed in an earlier issue.

You get a guarantee with this letter—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Hello! Have you room for just one more Pen Pal? I have writting to many Pen Pals in your Hollow Tree but have never received an answer; so I decided to send you a letter, hopin' to hear from some members of the Tree who see my letter in print. I am twenty-nine years old, a native of Oklahoma, six feet tall and have gray-blue eyes, light hair and a light complexion, except for a good old sun tan at the present time. My hobby is writing letters, and I like all kinds of sports, indoors and out. Come on, Pen Pals, old or young, male or female, and fill a lonely farm boy's mailbox. Will answer all letters if it takes me all night to do it. I am very busy during the daytime, but Sunday or rainy days I'm free, so they're letter days. Will exchange snapshots with all who wish and guarantee to answer all letters.—Elmo Senkoff, Route No. 1, Box 66, Tracy, Iowa

Sports are Helen's chief interest—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a lonely girl of seventeen and would enjoy hearing from some Pen Pals. I am a junior in high school and am interested in almost everything, but like sports extra well. I am lonesome for some real friendship, so won't you publish my plea? My most enjoyable hobby is writing letters and collecting photos.—Helen Ward, Buffalo Street, Marion, New York

Here's a challenge, gals—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Hardly a week passes that I don't read Western Story, and I enjoy it very much, particularly the Hollow Tree. I have answered quite a few letters published there and have received many interesting replies, but this is the first time I have ever sent in a letter to be published. I am twenty-two years old, six feet two inches tall, and think my looks will just about pass—if you cannot see too good! Among others, my hobbies are: reading, writing, and repairing typewriters. I cannot dance, but would like to learn, so if any of you gals think you can teach me, I'll bet a surprise that you can't. Letters from all over the good old U. S. A. are welcome. —Michael Orlowsky, P. O. Box 95, West Haverstraw, New York

Write to this Georgia farmerette—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Do hope there is room for one more lonely plea for Pen Pals in the Hollow Tree. I am a farm girl from north Georgia, five feet tall, have blue eyes and blond hair and am twenty-seven years old. Please print this and I promise to answer all comers, from everywhere, so come on, everybody, and sling some ink my way.—Era B. Lee, Route No. 1, Felton, Georgia

Pals, to the rescue—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I have written to many Pals in the Hollow Tree, but they don't seem to answer me, so I'm putting in my own letter to see if I get any results. I am seventeen years old, five feet seven inches tall, have brown eyes and hair. Please, Pals, write to me, for I am lonesome. Boys or girls are welcome.—Rita Rossman, 258 Litchfield Avenue, Southbridge, Massachusetts

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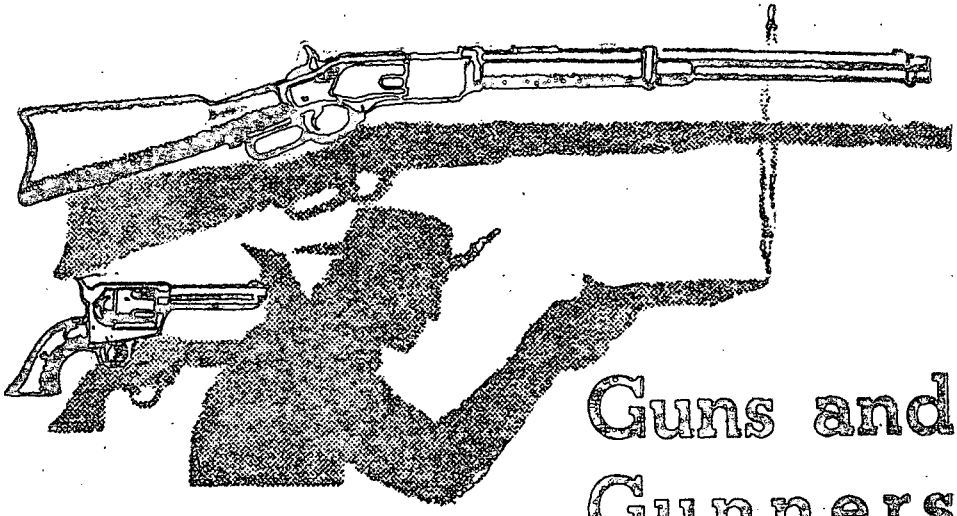

Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

WITH so much interest in war production and small arms, many of our good friends hear conflicting rumors and thus wish information on the old, old question: "What is a Springfield rifle?"

Let's look back on a bit of history. Uncle Sam's own small-arms manufacturing plant (rifles and pistols) has always been the United States Arsenal, Springfield, Mass., better known as Springfield Armory. In a recent magazine article, a prominent author and ex-army officer stated that Springfield Armory had been making rifles since 1777. Let's look at the facts.

The first gun of the newly formed United States was of French manufacture—the Model 1763 Charleville musket. Some 23,000 were brought in early in 1777. It was a smoothbore flintlock in .69 caliber with a 44¾-inch barrel. We also had a big batch of French guns made between 1718 and 1777.

The first American-made gun was the Model 1795. It was a modification of the Charleville. Records do not show when Springfield Armory first made them, but the earliest in the hands of collectors is dated 1801.

Springfield Armory was originally a supply depot and powder magazine. In 1777 General George Washington authorized the establishment as an official armory. By 1878 a plant was established to load "cartridges"—a paper affair containing both the charge of powder and a musket ball. To use it, the soldier would bite off the twisted end of the paper, pour in the charge of powder, drop in the paper, and then ram home the paper-wrapped musket ball—the paper serving as a wad.

At the close of the Revolutionary War, the temporary plant at Springfield, along with others, was partially closed. On April 26, 1782 the Continental Congress authorized, at Washington's request, a permanent plant at Springfield. This was mostly for powder storage and was located on the hill in what is now the active center of the city of Springfield. It was used for sixty years and the powder magazines were torn down in 1842 because of dangers to nearby homes.

By act of Congress April 2, 1794,

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Springfield Armory was completely altered. Up to this time records show that *no rifles were manufactured.* Military arms had been repaired there during the Revolution.

That 1794 act established Springfield Armory as having 297 acres, 18 rods of land—about what it is today. But it is well to understand that Springfield Armory is and always has been, two separate plants—called by workmen the "Hill Shops" and the "Water Shops." The two areas are two miles apart.

A mixture of early records indicates that some muskets were produced at Springfield in 1795. Twenty muskets were completed in a month at a cost of $20 each plus $5 per gun for accessories.

In that year, records show that a total of 445 muskets were built—the smallest number in any one year of construction. There were forty employees and the pay roll was only $4,495.75. Probably this is the pay roll for one month as it represents an average of only $112.40 per man.

The Armory facilities have constantly been expanded. In 1864 it produced 276,200 guns with a pay roll of $4,247,998.84 for 2,992 employees. In November 1919, "Springfield" rifles were being produced at the rate of 1,500 per day as compared with 175 when the World War started.

The earliest Springfield muskets bearing the stamp of the American Eagle is about 1800. These stamps were ordered made June 11, 1799.

Any gun out of Springfield Armory has been called the "Springfield," and rightly so.

Springfield guns include the Charleville, made with slight modifications and several improvements until 1842 in .69 caliber. Then came the reduction to .58 caliber. Also the change from flintlock to percussion cap ignition.

The Civil War spelled doom to the muzzle-loader. These early guns on hand were altered under patent designs of E. F. Allin and made into breechloaders. Caliber was again reduced to .50. Centerfire cartridges were adopted.

In 1873 the army adopted the .45-70 cartridge in a Springfield development. This replaced the .50-70 government cartridge, and remained standard until 1892 when the famous Krag was adopted. However many of these .45-70 single shots were used during the Spanish-American War.

In 1903 the famous present-day Springfield was born—the model of that date. It was made until the adoption of the Garand semi-automatic using the same cartridge in 1940. Tools were transferred to a private arms maker and this famous Model 1903 is still being made for military service—the most powerful and accurate military arm in the world although not as fast as the Garand.

Springfield Armory has produced arms for our forces for 147 years. The place is steeped in history.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*

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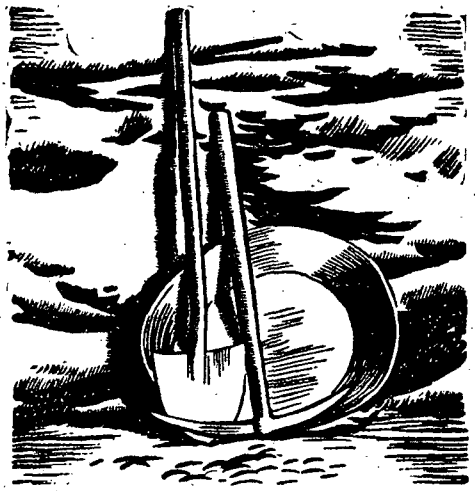

Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

THERE is a special form of uranium called U-235 and, fantastic as it sounds, tiny quantities of this mineral product may represent one of the world's greatest sources of power in the future. One pound of the tremendous energy-liberating U-235 is said to be capable of yielding as much power *as five million pounds of coal, or three million gallons of gasoline.* Moreover it releases the power in a method that is automatic and can be readily controlled.

Whether production of U-235 on a commercial scale becomes practical or not is still a question. Scientists are giving it plenty of study. At least half a dozen laboratories are working on the fascinating problem of commercial utilization of this intensely radioactive substance.

Similarly there has been a steady but quiet search going on among certain prospectors and mining men in this country for available sources of uranium ore, the material from which U-235 is extracted. Not all uranium is the type that produces these potential powerhouses, literally in a nutshell. Perhaps one tenth of one percent of ordinary uranium is U-235. Even so the small quantity of this magic material needed to produce power equivalent to tons and tons of coal may make uranium one of the most important metals for which the future ore hunter can seek.

S. T., of Chattanooga, Tennessee, queried us just recently about U-235. "What is it?" his letter asked. "My understanding is that it is some form of uranium. Though it may be some time before I am able to take another prospecting trip I would appreciate anything you can tell me about U-235, or the uranium ores in which it is found. Are there any sections in this country in which such ores are known to occur?"

There are perhaps a hundred minerals, S. T., that contain uranium. All of these are quite rare, and in most of them the actual uranium content is so small that they are not suitable for concentration and extraction of the metal on a commercial scale. There are two main exceptions—pitchblende and carnotite. Find a good-grade deposit of either one of these and you may have the making of an extremely valuable primary source of uranium.

Pitchblende is a complex ore containing uranium, radium, lead and minor amounts of other rare metals. In the past it has been sought extensively as an ore of radium. It gets its name from its color which is tar black. A specimen may look very much like the more common obsidian or rock glass and it breaks with the same peculiar, circular shell-like fracture. Ob-

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sidian, however, is light while real pitchblende is noticeably heavy. It takes a sharp knife to scratch pitchblende, and the scratch mark is not black like the rock but rather a distinctive *olive-green*.

Pitchblende sometimes occurs as masses of black rock, or as a filler material in cracks and small openings in a general rock formation. The ore has been found in the United States near Central City in Gilpin County, Colorado, in connection with mines that were originally worked for their gold content.

Carnotite, the second commercial source of uranium, also contains vanadium and is at the same time a radium ore as well. It has been found and mined in Colorado, often mainly for its vanadium values, in Rio Blanco and Routt counties and in the famous Paradox Valley district in San Miguel and Montrose counties. It has also been found in Utah near the Green River.

Unlike the massive pitchblende, carnotite usually occurs as a powder in rock cavities, or as grains in rocks, notably in sandstone and shale formations. Its canary-yellow color, making it look like powdered sulphur, is one of its chief identifying characteristics. It is only medium heavy and like talc is very soft.

Typical carnotite ore, such for example as is found in Colorado's Paradox Valley area, is shot through the sandstone in small grains that are neverthless sufficiently numerous to give the entire formation the yellow tingue of the uranium-bearing mineral. Aside from the widespread particles, now and then masses or pockets of almost pure carnotite have been located in these deposits. Some of the pockets have been large enough to produce several tons of ore at a clip. However it may take as high as fifty thousand tons of commercial ore to yield about twenty tons of uranium, from which of course only a very much smaller quantity of the rare U-235 could be extracted.

Continued prospecting may result in further discoveries in the future. A start seems to have been made already with reports in of uranium minerals occurring (aside from the previously mentioned Colorado and Utah deposits) in the Ruby Mountains of Nevada, the Black Hills of South Dakota, in North Carolina and Connecticut. The majority of these latter "specimen" finds are more on the order of isolated occurrences and not in sufficient quantity to produce a minable ore of commercial value. Yet they are hopeful indications. At any rate when or if the magic power substance, U-235, graduates from the laboratory into practical use there is going to be a lot more searching done in this country for additional deposits of uranium, either pitchblende or carnotite or both.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

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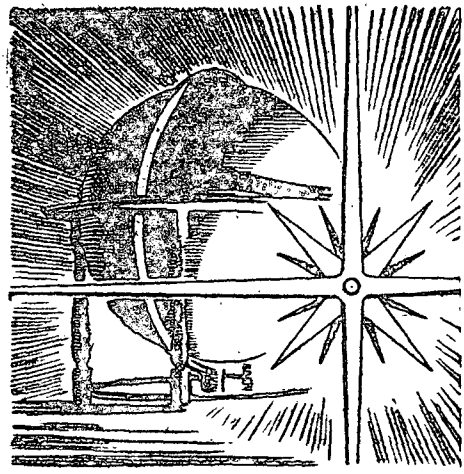

Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

PACK-HORSE trips offer an ideal method of off-the-trail camping in many sections of the West and Southwest. Days in the saddle, nights under the western stars. The combination is hard to beat.

T. H., writing from Lincoln, Nebraska, mentioned pack-horse trips this week. "It seems to me," his letter said, "the subject ought to be timely these days. No gas or tire worries on a pack-horse trip. Just the big outdoors and the clean smell of the pines on a winding mountain trail. Is Colorado a good State for such trips?"

It certainly is, T. H. One of the best. Practically all of Colorado's spectacular mountain region, which means slightly more than one half of the State, is ideal for pack trips. You can take your choice of comparatively short overnight stays out from the more populated districts along the eastern slope of the Continental Divide to trips of longer duration that will take you deep into the rugged, heavily wooded western slope of the Rockies, or into the primitive San Juan Mountain area down in the southwestern part of the State.

There are some fourteen National Forests in Colorado, two National Parks and eight National Monuments, all of which add up to miles and miles of possible mountain-country pack trips. In the Rocky Mountain National Park, for instance, the trails offer by far the best opportunities to see and explore the real beauty of the country.

In addition virtually all of Colorado's many dude ranches schedule pack trips as a regular feature of their guest program.

The vacation camper with a pack-horse trip in mind had better not attempt any extended trail journey into the mountain wilderness without a competent guide and packer along to take charge of the party —unless, of course, he is an old hand at all sorts of camping, and a thoroughly experienced horseman himself. Even so a guide who knows exactly the country to be traversed, the trails and best camping places is usually a mighty helpful man to have along. Besides as a rule the guide supplies the pack animals, riding horses, saddles, and the necessary camping equipment.

Your personal stuff you take along yourself and it should be serviceable for the trip in mind. Most summer pack trips in Colorado or elsewhere in the western mountain country involve journeys that take you up to high altitudes. This means that though the days are warm and sunny, evenings and nights will be crisply cool or even cold. So though a light cotton shirt

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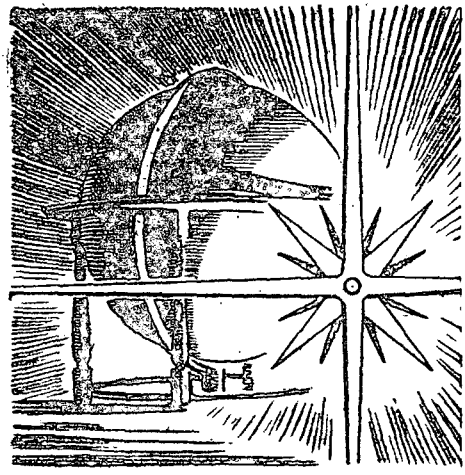

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may be all right for the day ride, better take a flannel one along for evenings or cold spells on mountaintops and be sure to have a good warm sweater in your outfit. A leather jacket, preferably of the waterproof type, is almost sure to come in handy.

You will find many of the native Westerners wearing blue jeans and high-heeled boots for general saddle use. To a tenderfoot, however, the high-heeled riding boots may be uncomfortable and any walking in them, even around camp, will be like learning to walk all over again. Those unaccustomed to such gear therefore will probably do better to stick to riding breeches, leggings or leather puttees and ordinary stout camping shoes, roomy enough to permit wearing woolen socks inside them without cramping the feet.

When it comes to bedding, again remember that high altitudes in the Rockies are cold at night, even in midsummer. A light sleeping bag, or a bedroll with a double pair of good woolen blankets will not be too warm.

Novice or no, every pack-horse-trip camper should learn to saddle his own mount. On mountain trails and rough up-and-down going the double-cinch or "rimfire" Western saddle is the most satisfactory. The Western style because that is generally the most comfortable for day-long, or hard riding; double-cinch because in ascending or descending steep pitches a centerfire or single-cinch saddle is almost certain to shift no matter how tightly it may be adjusted at the start of the day's trek.

To C. P., Hammond, Indiana: There has been a definite trend in many Western communities toward the livestock-fattening business. Several factors have brought this about. One of these is the increasing population of the West-coast areas which has developed a much bigger market than heretofore for finished meat products in that area. Another is the fact that many suitably situated Western farmers and ranchers have been finding it logical to shift at least part of their operations to a stock-feeding enterprise. They are near large supplies of range-grown feeder livestock that respond well to a feeding program. And they are reasonably near farms or irrigation projects from which they can readily obtain feed for fattening the animals.

In many parts of western Montana, for instance, quite a few farmers and ranchers have branched into feeding. The winter climate in the valleys is not too severe, just crisp enough to give the stock a good fattening appetite. Farmers in these valleys have discovered they can use the feeds they grow—sugar-beet pulp, tops, alfalfa hay, barley, oats, wheat, and sometimes even corn. The combination makes a year-around type of farming, whether the feeder stock is bought or grown by the farmer himself to suit his own requirements.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

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PART TWO

PARDNERS OF THE BADLANDS

by Harry Sinclair Drago

The Story So Far:

Rainbow Ripley and his partner, Grumpy Gibbs, range detectives, receive an offer to accompany an expedition led by Professor Thaddeus Hammersley which is about to make an attempt to run the canyons of the Green and Colorado rivers, but they turn it down to accept a job from the Rocky Mountain Shortline. Their first assignment is to look into the wrecking of a freight train on Split Mountain, and they discover that the object of the wreck was the "Silk Express," a train which travels once a month from Ogden to Denver carrying almost a million dollars' worth of raw silk. The Silk Express had been delayed because of a minor accident and the freight train had run on its time.

Unknown to Rainbow, the Hammersley Expedition is merely a blind for an attempt to raid the Silk Express, and to help him accomplish his ends, Hammersley, and his confidential secretary, a Japanese named Saburo Itchi, have hired Samson Brant and

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a gang of hard cases who are to serve as the expedition's crew.

Rainbow is able to trace the wrecking of the freight train to Blue Morgan, a badlands desperado and his gang, but he has no evidence against them. Stalemated for the time being, he decides to pay a call on Professor Hammersley, who has arrived in the town of Black Forks, preparatory to getting his expedition under way.

CHAPTER V

DEVIL'S DEAL

GETTING their horses, the partners rode down to the camp. Brant's men had made a bonfire of driftwood. Enjoying its warmth, the members of the expedition sat around discussing their plans for the trip. Some of them were still seated at the long table where they had had supper.

When Rainbow and Grumpy were within a hundred yards of the fire they were stopped in quite the same manner as on their previous visit. Again it was Ginger Revell who confronted them. When he saw who they were, he lost some of his surliness.

"I guess yo're expected," he said. "The perfessor's over there at the table." He indicated the direction with his rifle and they rode on.

"They're a queer-lookin' lot," Grumpy muttered under his breath, his glance traveling from Saburo Itchi to Dr. Johan Borelius, the well-known geologist from Sweden and on to Anne Wattress, the landscape painter. "A woman in breeches, an' puffin' a cigarette! Blue had 'em sized up right!"

Rainbow's attention was focused on the dark-haired girl who turned to greet them. "This must be Rainbow Ripley and his partner!" he heard her tell the others.

If Rainbow failed to catch the appraising glance that Itchi and Hammersley gave him, Samson Brant did not. The three were seated together at the end of the table. "Remember what I told you in New York," Brant reminded them under this breath. "They're as shrewd as they look!"

"I was disappointed not to find you here when we arrived," the professor told the partners. He introduced them to the others. "You're just in time; we expect to leave in the morning. Everything is in readiness. After tonight the stars will be our tent."

For a time the conversation was general. Rainbow found himself cataloguing these people and trying to fit them into a pattern. Borelius, Thursby, a photographer, and little Ulysses S. Potts, the eminent zoologist, were easily disposed of. Karen Thane and Miss Wattress were patently above suspicion. Professionally, the undertaking promised opportunities as interesting to them as anything Borelius or Dr. Potts hoped to find. If Rainbow did not dismiss young Jim Darwin, the ethnologist, with the others it was only because he felt that Darwin's real interest in the expedition was Professor Hammersley's ward, Karen Thane. Samson Brant he knew to be a crook. Hammersley himself and the wooden-faced Itchi raised a long series of questions in his mind, however, and he refused to accept them as just a pair of guileless and innocent scientific adventurers.

"Let us step into my tent," the professor suggested when the fire had burned down and Miss Wattress and several others had said good night. "We will find it warmer inside; I have a small primus stove. We will miss such little conveniences I'm afraid. Unfortunately we must leave all this camping equipment behind."

Itchi held up the tent flap. Rain-

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bow was about to follow the others when Karen Thane offered him her hand and said good night.

"I'm so glad you are going with us," she said sincerely. "I'm sure we shall all feel safer. I know I shall."

RAINBOW knew a moment's deep regret at having to tell her that Grumpy and he would not be accompanying them. He was about to speak when young Darwin inserted himself into the situation. He seemed to resent the girl's friendliness and interest in Ripley.

"I didn't know you had any misgivings about the trip, Karen," he remarked contentiously. "You know I will look out for you. A boat may be swamped, but Mr. Ripley could hardly prevent that. We'll be wearing cork life jackets, so the worst you have to fear is a wetting."

Darwin was a clear-eyed youngster, with the body of an athlete. Several years of field work in the Southwest had tanned his skin a healthy brown. Rainbow did not hold the man's resolve to elect himself Karen Thane's protector against him. In fact, it was a privilege he himself would have relished. This eager, dark-eyed girl stirred him deeply. No other reason prompted him to put off telling her that he was not going along.

"I'll see you in the morning," he promised. "We'll have more to say about this."

He found Grumpy and the others waiting for him inside.

"I've left it to you to tell 'em how things stand," the little fellow told his partner. His tone said definitely that they were to hear news. Itchi's face remained a perfect mask, and the only betraying sign of Hammersley's quickened interest was a faint contraction of the eyes. Samson Brant did not bother to dissemble his elation.

"It's just that circumstances have come up that make it impossible for us to accept your offer, professor," Rainbow said. The conflicting reactions of the three men were not lost on him.

"You . . . mean you have a job?" Hammersley inquired.

"We're working for the Rocky Mountain Shortline."

It was a bombshell, and only imperturbable Saburo Itchi heard it explode without a trace of surprise.

"Is that so?" Hammersley queried. "That's very unfortunate. Very!" It was a strangely prophetic utterance, though he did not intend it as such. Unconsciously his piercing eyes began to burn with their peculiar fire at this dangerous upsetting of his plans.

"We can't blame you for taking a job like that. After all, it's steady work," Brant put in. "We'll have to get along without you." He was relieved, and his tone gave every indication of it.

Rainbow told them how he and Grumpy had been called over to Platte City by Moran. "Working for a railroad is a new experience for us," he said. "But we owed Moran a favor. When word came in that somebody had wrecked a freight at Split Mountain, we felt we had to take the job."

"Of course," Itchi murmured, moving into the breach as he saw Hammersley and Brant stiffen at this news. "It sounds very exciting." He turned to the professor. "You see, doctor, the West is still wild. Robbery was the motive, I presume. But I do not seem to remember reading about this affair in the newspaper, Mr. Ripley. It occurred some time ago?"

"No, just a week ago yesterday.

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About nine o'clock in the evening."

He was deliberately supplying the Japanese with the information he felt the other secretly wanted. Hammersley and Brant had followed this apparently stale bit of dialogue with marked attention. Their eyes remained fixed on Saburo. The latter nodded almost imperceptibly.

RAINBOW caught it and could only guess at its significance. Its effect on Brant was immediate, however. Something touched his rocky face and left it bloodless for a moment. He was in the dark as to Itchi's sources of information regarding the silk expresses, but he had satisfied himself that the Nipponese knew when they were due to come through. These questions about the time of the wreck had but one purpose, and when Itchi nodded, Brant knew that the wrecking of the freight had resulted from a bungled attempt to stop a silk train.

Brant had said nothing to Hammersley about his meeting with Blue Morgan; he had not taken Blue too seriously. He was of another opinion now, and his first thought was to get down to the river and warn Revell and the rest of his hand-picked thugs to be ready for trouble.

A few minutes after Brant left the tent, Professor Hammersley got to his feet, signifying that the interview was over; he had been shaken by the news and he wanted to be alone with Itchi.

"We'll say good night," Rainbow drawled. "We'll see you for a minute in the morning."

"Yeah," Grumpy echoed. It was the first word he had spoken in minutes. "Pleased to have met yuh, perfessor and Mr. Itchi."

He was nearest the entrance. He reached out to raise the flap, and just as he did so a gun barked at the river's edge. It was followed by a second and third shot, evidently from the same weapon.

Rainbow and the little man rushed out, closely followed by Hammersley and Itchi. In a moment the whole camp was in commotion.

"Those shots came from down where the boats are tied up!" Rainbow exclaimed. He ran that way, Grumpy and the others a step behind him. They had gone only a few yards when they saw Brant standing on the bank, a smoking pistol in his hand.

"What is it, Brant?" Rainbow demanded.

"Somebody was trying to make off with our boats. I stopped him. I suppose he knew they were loaded with cameras and expensive equipment."

Jim Darwin ran up, a candle lantern in his hand.

"Let's have that light!" Grumpy growled. Grabbing the lantern, he and Rainbow ran ahead.

"There he is," Rainbow muttered as he caught sight of the man sprawled out grotesquely on the wet bank. "Grumpy, it's Chink Johnson!"

"An' he's deader'n a mackerel!"

Before the others arrived, Ripley cut a piece out of the dead man's shirt and slipped it into a pocket. "Let's get away from here as soon as we can," he said hurriedly. "This bird wasn't trying to steal this stuff with the idea of turning it into cash. Blue was out to stop this expedition before it ever got started."

HAMMERSLEY and three or four others reached them a moment later. With a complete absence of feeling, Itchi examined the body and then raised his inscrutable eyes to Samson Brant.

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"I congratulate you on your marksmanship, Mr. Brant," he murmured. From his tone he might have been discussing some interesting laboratory experiment. "Any one of your three shots would have killed him."

"Well! I must say I was not prepared for anything of this nature." Thaddeus Hammersley spoke with undiluted honesty for a change. Rainbow suspected as much. "Brant, do you know this man?"

"Never laid eyes on him before," was the prompt answer. Grumpy and Rainbow exchanged a glance.

"I can help you out," the latter volunteered. "He called himself Chink Johnson. He's run afoul of the law a number of times. I guess there won't be any question about this shooting, but the sheriff will have to be called in."

"He shall be notified at once," the professor assured him. "I hope this does not hold us up for any length of time."

"I don't know any reason why it should," said Ripley. "But I'll speak to Effingham."

He and Grumpy made their way back to their horses. They found Karen Thane waiting for them and making no attempt to conceal her alarm. The shooting had only confirmed her growing feeling that something sinister was moving under the surface close to her.

"This is a tragic beginning," she said, trying to hold her voice steady. "You see, my fears were well founded. I . . . I hope this isn't a forerunner of worse things to come."

Rainbow gazed at her with deep concern. "Miss Thane, why do you say that?"

"I . . . I don't know," Karen answered nervously. "It's just that nothing seems to be quite right. These men Mr. Brant has engaged do not inspire any confidence in me. And uncle—Dr. Hammersley—seems so preoccupied and not like himself at all. I . . . I'm afraid for him. I couldn't say why."

"I don't believe there's any reason to be alarmed any more tonight," Rainbow said reassuringly. On the spot he made a secret decision. "You . . . wouldn't consider letting the expedition go on without you?"

"Why no," she said. "I couldn't withdraw now! I've dreamed of a chance like this so long."

Rainbow nodded understandingly. "I figured that was the way you felt."

"There's a fine girl," Grumpy told him as they rode back to Black Forks.

"Too fine to be put up against a deal like this." Ripley's tone was grim. "I promise you I'll have something to say about this!"

THE grizzled little man flicked a troubled glance at him, wondering just what the remark meant. He knew they were still only grabbing at the loose ends of this tangled web of crime and intrigue, but he was as fully convinced as Rainbow that the Hammersley Expedition held the answer to the riddle.

"Turn up the lamp," Ripley told him as they stepped into their hotel room. "We'll settle one thing in a hurry."

Placing the piece of goods that he had cut out of Chink Johnson's shirt on the dresser, he laid the sample from the Wasatch Mills down beside it. The two pieces matched perfectly.

"Waal, it ain't no more than we expected," Grumpy said disparagingly. "It's evidence, but Johnson's dead. You'll find yoreself whistlin'

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up Windy Creek if you try to use it to pin anythin' on Morgan."

"I wasn't thinking of Blue; I wanted to be sure of this in my own mind." Rainbow placed the two pieces of cloth in an envelope and put them away for safe-keeping.

Grumpy had pulled off his boots and was preparing for bed. "You goin' to turn in?" he questioned.

"Before I do, I'm going downstairs and write a letter and make sure that it goes out to the ranch in the morning."

That brought the little one's head up sharply. "Why is that? I thought we was goin' out ourselves."

"Grumpy, how long should it take Hammersley to reach Brown's Park?"

"Ten days at most. There's some bad places in Red Canyon, but nuthin' to what they'll meet once they git below the park." The little man's eyes had fastened on Rainbow with sobering intensity. "Why do you ask?"

"Because we're going that far with them. I'll ask the judge to have Howie Hallett meet us there with our horses and gear."

The expected explosion did not come. Instead, Grumpy sat there on the edge of the bed, frowning at his toes and saying nothing for a minute.

"You're right!" he agreed at last. "We're in this now. If we're goin' to see it through we better git us some front-row seats. Between here and Brown's Park we oughta be able to bust the lid off of somethin'!"

CHAPTER VI

DANGEROUS EVIDENCE

UTAH JIM McBRIDE, who was to guide the Hammersley Expedition in the much publicized descent of the Colorado, had gone almost unnoticed during the stay at Black Forks, but once the boats were actually moving down the river, he quickly established his importance, with even Hammersley deferring to his judgment. McBride claimed that he had run the upper canyons several times.

Rainbow and Grumpy had no reason to doubt him, and by the time they reached the Flaming Gorge, two days later, they were convinced that the man knew the river. Keeping the boats strung out, so that disaster to one would not endanger the others, he skillfully avoided the treacherous Suck at the entrance to the gorge. Once inside the portal, they found themselves floating on tranquil waters. Along the eastern wall the cottonwoods were breaking into bloom. Through their yellow-green lace tier on tier of mighty red rocks reared their heads, so evenly placed it seemed a race of unknown Titans had once toiled here.

Grumpy rested on his oar, paying silent tribute to the majestic beauty of the scene unfolding about them. He turned then and spoke to Borelius, the Swede. "This is yore first good look at the Uintas. Some of them peaks climb up in the sky a ways!"

"Magnificent!" Borelius exclaimed. "Reminds me of home."

Rainbow and Grumpy found Borelius a pleasant companion. Together with big Gass Labelle, the black-browed French Canadian whom Brant had rescued from jail, the three men comprised the crew of this boat.

Labelle had the strength of an ox. Borelius, though he was no longer young, possessed a brawny pair of shoulders. It led Rainbow to believe that their boat was the

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best manned in the party. He was further convinced of it when they ran the rapids in Horseshoe Canyon without scraping an oar. The others were not so fortunate. Jim Darwin's boat struck a ledge and he was tossed into the foaming river. Grumpy and Borelius fished him out. A minute later Brant's craft swung around broadside in a swirl of white water and all but turned over. It hung there perilously, and only Jim McBride's insistence that all blankets, supplies and instruments be kept in rubber bags and stowed away in the compartments under sealed hatches saved them from being lost.

The mishaps cost an hour, but before the afternoon was gone, Horseshoe and Kingfisher had been left behind and they were well into the twenty-five-mile trough of Red Canyon. It was no longer necessary to touch the oars, except to guide the boats. The pitch of the river was steeper, the current sweeping along, pocked with treacherous boils and whirlpools. The whole appearance of the country had changed. The trees had disappeared. Not a bird was to be seen. Grim, unbroken, the canyon walls rose sheer for twenty-five hundred feet.

GLANCING ahead, Rainbow could see great rocks rearing up out of the river and running together as though to make passage impossible. Even the walls of the canyon seemed to pinch suddenly, squeezing the river between them. A distant thunder reached his ears. In a few minutes its wild roar filled the canyon. All the beasts of the jungle, crying out in their wrath, could not have matched it.

"Say, that sounds bad!" Grumpy burst out. "What can you see?"

"It must be Ashley Falls!" Ripley shouted. He could glimpse now where the river, swollen by this temporary check, fought its way through the cliffs. It dropped out of sight for a few yards, but beyond it was an unbroken sheet of churning white water. Sight of it was enough to tighten his mouth. "McBride is mad if he tries to run the falls tonight!"

They were second in line in the flotilla of eleven. McBride was in the heavily laden lead boat, with Hammersley, Itchi and two of Brant's men. Labelle, in the stern, kept his eyes fixed on the craft ahead.

"McBride, she's signaling to us now!" Labelle yelled a moment later. They saw that the guide had raised his oar and was motioning for them to make for a low, rocky bar at the base of the west wall.

"'Bout time!" Grumpy growled. "Put some stuff on these oars!"

Pulling across the current with a will, they reached the bar ahead of the first boat. At the last moment the torrent caught them with unexpected force, and they could feel the keel grating dangerously as they dashed up on the bar. Stout as the hulls were, Rainbow knew the boats could not stand much of this. Wading in up to their waists, he and Borelius caught the other boats as they rushed in, checking their speed. He could see that even Hammersley and the Japanese had caught the excitement of this hazardous tilting with the river. For a moment the two men seemed to forget the malign purpose of the expedition, and this coming to grips with nature in one of its wildest moods was uppermost in their minds.

Samson Brant was the last man ashore. He had just stepped out of his boat when a rifle cracked up on

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the rim of the canyon wall, far above. The range was almost eight hundred yards long, even for a high-powered gun. The slug found its intended mark, however. Blood spurted over Brant's face, and the impact of the bullet spun him around and flung him down on the sand.

The unseen marksman, evidently believing he had accomplished his purpose, did not fire a second time. Ginger Revell and four or five others grabbed their rifles and spattered the rim with a vicious fusillade.

"MOVE in nearer to the wall!" Ripley cried. "You look out for the women, Darwin!" He and Grumpy picked Brant up and carried him back to where the cliff cut in enough to make any sniping from above impossible.

Little Ulysses Potts came to take care of Brant's wound and proved himself a capable doctor. "A bloody wound," he said, "but not a serious one. He will be all right in a few minutes." He bandaged Brant's head, and a few moments after he finished, the latter sat up, staring about him uncertainly as consciousness returned.

"That was a close call, Brant," Professor Hammersley said, more alarmed than he chose to admit. "I suppose we should have been expecting something like this after what happened at Black Forks." With the killing of Chink Johnson, Brant had found it advisable to give Hammersley and Itchi the details of Morgan's threat.

"You're right," Brant muttered. "I suppose this was some friend of Johnson—"

"Blue Morgan would be the name," Rainbow put in quietly. Watching the effect of his statement on the three men convinced him that Hammersley and his secretary shared Brant's knowledge of Blue.

"You may be right; I wouldn't know," Brant declared gruffly. "You're handing out a name that doesn't mean a thing to me. I—"

"Perhaps Mr. Ripley can tell us something about the gentleman," Itchi cut Brant off before he could make any damaging admission.

Rainbow nodded. "I'll be glad to." This wasn't the first time he had seen the unsmiling, carefully mannered Oriental take command of the conversation when it touched precarious ground. It confirmed his opinion that Itchi was fully as dangerous as the other two. He knew the question that was running through their minds. Having brought Blue's name up, they were asking themselves how much more he knew. "Morgan's only been out of the penitentiary several months, but he's already got together a gang of desperate, hard-riding men who carry their law on their hip," he told them. "Chink Johnson was one of them. We showed up in Black Forks when we did because we had trailed Blue and his man Johnson into town that evening. We were curious to know what their business was there."

"You . . . found out?" Hammersley queried. His tone wasn't as casual as he thought.

Rainbow shrugged. "Partly," he said.

He had deliberately increased the suspicion against Grumpy and himself. The little man took him to task about it the second they were alone.

"Well, in your own words, you figured we might be able to bust the lid off of something by tagging along," Rainbow answered. "This was my way of doing it. This will thaw out something, I promise you."

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HE was hardly prepared for the turn it was to take, however. For obvious reasons, Utah Jim McBride ordered that no fire be lighted that evening. After eating a cold supper, the members of the expedition broke up into little groups. Brant's men drew off by themselves. When Ripley looked around for Grumpy he found the crusty little man enjoying the company of Anne Wattress. The sight made Rainbow smile. "Filling her full of some tall tales," he mused.

Jim Darwin hailed Rainbow through the deepening shadows as he walked to the end of the bar.

"Sit down with us a minute, Rainbow," Darwin urged. "Karen and I want to talk to you."

Ripley was glad to oblige.

"Before we say any more," Darwin told him, "I want to take back what I said in Black Forks about our not being likely to run into any trouble. I was wrong, and I admit it. I suppose Brant was within his rights in shooting the man who was trying to steal our boats; certainly the sheriff seemed to think so. But isn't it a fact that if the dead man's friends are out for revenge that they can take pot shots at us all the way down the river?"

Rainbow shook his head. "No, this is one of the few places where it would be possible. I know that country up above. Most of the cliffs are so sheer that not even a mountain sheep could get a toehold on them."

"That's something to be thankful for," Darwin said. "You didn't foresee this sniping, of course? That couldn't have been what you had in mind that evening?"

"No," Ripley answered. Seeing the direction the conversation was taking, he was anxious to turn it. He knew they would hear from Morgan again; that Blue would make another, and possibly more successful, attempt to stop them before they had proceeded much farther. That danger was as nothing, he felt, to those that menaced the expedition from within. To say anything concerning the latter was impossible, and to mention the other could only add to Karen Thane's already deep sense of alarm. "The river seems to be our most immediate problem," he said finally. "I don't know how McBride expects to get these boats over the falls without capsizing everyone."

"I was just speaking with him," Karen said. "He thinks we will have to let them down on ropes. Uncle spent weeks designing the boats for this trip, but McBride damns them at every opportunity."

"Yeah, I've heard him," Ripley laughed. "We may be half the day getting them over."

"So he says, but I gather it's his secret opinion that we'll be lucky to get them over at all." Karen pretended to dismiss it lightly, but Rainbow saw her wince as she listened to the wild roar of the falls. "It's like Niagara beating in your ears," she said in a very small voice.

"These things always seem worse at night," Darwin told her reassuringly. "The mishaps we've had so far always beset an expedition when it's starting out. Ashley Falls won't stop us. The experiences we are having here will toughen us up for what we have ahead of us . . . down in Lodore and Desolation."

"Of course, Jim," she murmured. She was silent for a moment, and then without warning she said: "Rainbow, why did you change your mind about coming with us at the last moment, after you had said it

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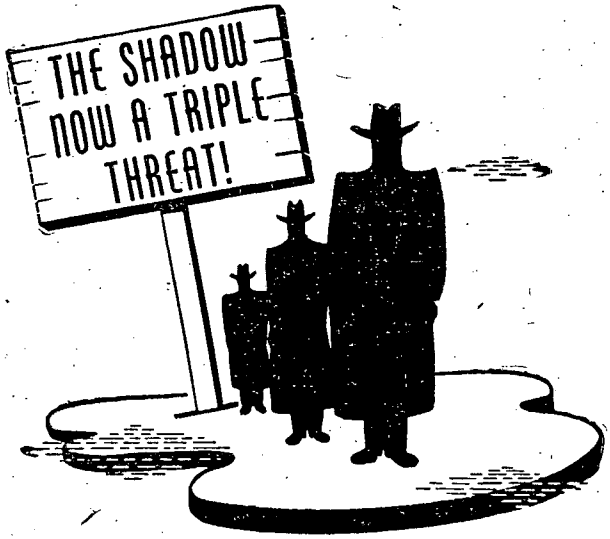

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would be impossible? Was it because you feared an attempt would be made to stop us from making the descent?"

"Why, no," Rainbow answered without hesitation, though the question had taken him by surprise. It was the second time in a few minutes that he had felt his hand being forced. He gave Karen a disarming smile. "I thought I might kill two birds with one stone. I was not only interested in the expedition, but I wanted to give Blue Morgan the idea that I wasn't watching him too closely. The Rocky Mountain Shortline would feel easier if Morgan were back in jail."

This was a long way around the bush, but it seemed to satisfy Karen. Hammersley, the Japanese and Brant also had their heads together over this question of the sudden change of mind by Rainbow and Grumpy, and had arrived at a very different answer.

THE three men had drawn off to themselves where they could talk without any chance of being overheard. They were agreed that the partners were not only acutely suspicious but possibly were aware of their plans.

"I warned you in New York that Ripley and Gibbs were poison; but you wouldn't listen to me!" Brant was a fearsome figure in his wrath. "Even when you found that they were working for the Rocky Mountain Shortline you refused to see it my way!" He glared at Hammersley contemptuously. "I know you figure the brains are all on your side. If the two of you are that bright, maybe you can tell me why Ripley flung Morgan's name in our teeth tonight."

"Obviously he hoped to surprise us into some damaging admission," Itchi answered him. "You all but permitted him to succeed." Without raising his voice he silenced Brant. "He and his partner were in Black Forks the night you met Morgan at the hotel. However little they know about what was said at that meeting, it is too much. I suspect they know all about it."

Brant wondered, too, though he protested vehemently that it was impossible.

"Your discretion has never impressed me," Hammersley rebuked him. "Keeping the matter back until circumstances compelled you to speak is only further proof of your stupidity. Ripley pretended to accept our explanation of the attempt to steal the boats. That deception should be enough in itself to tell us where we stand. Now he is so sure of himself that he deliberately arouses our suspicions."

"What are we going to do about it?" Brant growled. "That's all I want to know from you. We'll be in Brown's Park in three or four days. If we let that pair ride off about their business it'll be just the same as putting a gun to our heads!"

"They'll never see Brown's Park." The professor's eyes burned in the darkness. "Itchi and I will attend to that. In formulating our plans we recognized that the need for drastic action might arise."

"Definitely," the Nipponese murmured grimly.

In the morning Professor Hammersley and McBride succeeded in climbing up the wall for a distance of several hundred feet, from which point of vantage they made a careful study of the falls. On rejoining the others Hammersley announced that he was confident they could make this drop without any great danger.

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"There's fast, bad water just below the falls," McBride warned. "The current'll throw you acrost to the right. You'll be in trouble if you smash into that ledge."

The professor now announced that he was making some changes in the personnel of the various boats, in order that the strength of the crews might be more evenly matched. There was grumbling at this from the members of the expedition who had assigned themselves to one craft or another with more regard for pleasant companionship than any measuring of strength with the oars.

It was a move that won Rainbow's approval, however, especially when he saw Borelius put in with Karen. His enthusiasm dimmed when Saburo Itchi was assigned to the doctor's former place. Grumpy didn't like it either.

"That's givin' us the worst pick in the bunch," the little one grumbled. "It'll put an end to any loose talk in this boat."

"At least he'll hold up his end with the oars," Rainbow said. "These Japs are tireless."

A disparaging grunt was Grumpy's answer. "They got some trick wrestlin' holts. That's about all, I reckon. But I wouldn't care if he had the strength of the devil. I don't like the way that slant-eyed drink of ice water shows his teeth!"

Brant had selected four of his most experienced men to handle the ropes. They were to remain above the falls until the other boats were down. It then would be necessary for them to go over and trust to luck to see them through. But by that time there would be plenty of help below to go to their rescue if necessary. With a long line attached to the stern of the boat that was shooting the falls and the other end made fast to the one that was remaining above, a drag would be established, its weight depending on the muscle of the four men who would be rowing upstream.

WHEN all was ready, McBride and the professor took their places in the first boat. A few seconds after it had been pushed off the bar the current picked it up and swept it downriver. The four men at the end of the drag line put all they had into their oars. It checked the mad flight of the dancing shell that was now on the very brink of the plunge. There it seemed to stick, pounding up and down on the submerged rocks so violently that every second threatened to be its last.

A cry broke from the dry throats of the watchers on the bar as they saw McBride rise to his feet at risk of his neck and madly signal the men above to cast off the line. It was no sooner done than the released craft shot out over the crest and skittered across the swirling waters below.

"I guess we're next," Rainbow said.

"Yes," Itchi murmured. "Evidently a line is not feasible. We shall have to shoot the falls." He turned to Grumpy. "Do you swim, Mr. Gibbs?"

"Like a muskrat!" the little one answered tartly.

With the speed of an express train they shot over the falls, striking a reef that splintered the oar in Grumpy's hands and left him clutching the useless handle. For a second they seemed to hang in space. A shudder ran over the boat as it struck the foaming water below.

Gass Labelle's ratty eyes met Itchi's. This was the moment for which they had waited. Timing it so that it appeared to have been an

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accident, they let their oars cross. In the second or two that the oars were hung up, the boat veered off toward the dangerous ledges against which McBride had warned them. With Grumpy out of action, it left only Rainbow with an oar in the water, and before he could check his stroke they were caught in a violent eddy that threw the boat on the fangs of a foam-lashed reef, ripping the side out.

Itchi and Labelle, thrown clear by the impact, looked back to see the boat turning turtle and dropping down on Rainbow and Grumpy. The latter realized their danger, too, and escaped being trapped by a miracle. Grumpy got away, but before Rainbow could strike out for shore a pair of yellow arms locked around his neck and he felt a knee being driven into his back. He tried to grab Itchi—throw him off—break that strangling hold before the Japanese drowned him, but he couldn't reach him.

Pop-eyed at what he saw, Grumpy raised the three-foot stub of the broken oar, and as the current swept him near, he brought the club down on Itchi's head with a resounding thud.

"The danged yellow rat was tryin' to drown us!" the little man cried as the Japanese disappeared beneath the surface. "Labelle had his hand in it, too! The whole thing was rigged!"

"Yeah," Rainbow gasped, filling his lungs with air. "I was about done for. Grab the Jap when he comes up and drag him ashore. I can make it by myself."

A few yards below the falls some pines, a dozen or more, reared their lofty heads. There was level ground at their base and a short sandy beach. Grumpy dragged Itchi across it by the scruff of the neck, and, with small liking for his task, went to work on him.

"He's coming around," Rainbow muttered. He could see Labelle scrambling over the rocks farther down the river. "Don't let on to either one of them, or to anyone else, that we know this wasn't an accident."

Itchi began to stir a few moments later. Ripley bent down and slapped the man's face sharply. It had the desired effect. "That did it! He'll be all right."

"By Christopher, it's a pity, if you ask me!" Grumpy observed sourly.

Itchi opened his eyes presently. "So sorry," he murmured. "I do not swim, Mr. Ripley. If my hold had not been broken both of us would have drowned. Fortunately your partner was near. I shall not forget this."

"Mr. Mouthful of Teeth, we ain't fergettin' it either!" Grumpy growled to himself.

CHAPTER VII

CANYONS OF DEATH

THADDEUS HAMMERSLEY had witnessed the carefully planned accident to the partners' boat. Its unsatisfactory results left his face more hawklike than ever. The tension he was under—turning one face to Karen and the members of the expedition and meeting the threats to his secret plans with another—was beginning to tell on him. His piercing eyes burned with an insane intensity that had become more and more forbidding.

The other boats ran the falls with only minor damage. The professor waited until they were all down before he permitted himself to be rowed ashore.

"Ripley, when I saw you strike

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Continued from page 106

that ledge I thought everyone in your boat was done for. It shows what a little carelessness will lead to." His tone was sharp with annoyance. "I can't understand how you permitted yourselves to get caught like that. You had been warned explicitly."

Rainbow realized that this smooth attempt to put a virtuous face on the incident had a double purpose. Not only did it disclaim responsibility, but it was a subtle way of discovering whether Grumpy and he suspected the truth. He met it with guileless eyes.

"I don't know how it happened," he said. "My partner broke his oar. It seemed to throw the rest of us off timing. Before we could do anything, we crashed."

"That is true, doctor," Itchi spoke up. His tone was apologetic. "I am afraid the fault was largely mine; I am not a skilled oarsman. The loss of the boat is a serious blow, I realize."

"Slick how the two of 'em work together," Grumpy told himself.

"We shall remain here and repair the boat," Hammersley stated. "We cannot afford to begin losing them at this stage of the descent."

The wrecked craft, kept afloat by its watertight compartments, had been pulled up on the beach. It was McBride's opinion that it could not be repaired. The professor refused to change his dictum, however, and ordered Brant to put his best men to work on the hull at once.

The prospect of spending several days here below the falls appealed to the various members of the expedition, providing the first real opportunity that Darwin and the others had had for exploration. The walls had fallen back so that any danger of sniping from above was eliminated. A careful examination of the strata in a side canyon, made with the aid of field glasses, proved so interesting to Borelius that he suggested that Darwin and Brant accompany him for the day. Jim fell in with the idea eagerly, and Brant, trapped by his talk of being a mining man, could only agree. Thursby was already moving down the shore line, a tripod and camera over his shoulder.

SUSPECTING Brant's predicament, Rainbow had to smile to himself as the three men began their long climb. He was still watching them when Grumpy came bustling up.

"We're goin' to row across the river," the little one announced. "Lots of quiet water a few yards down."

"We?" Ripley queried suspiciously.

"Miz Wattress—"

"Oh! Seems to me you're going in for art pretty strong." Rainbow showed him a frosty, reproving glance that didn't fool Grumpy for a second.

"Hunh!" the latter snorted. "That ain't the half of it! Reckon I got talents you never suspected. If there's anythin' you'd like to know about them old Eyetalian painters, I'll be able to tell you by the time we hit the saddle ag'in."

"I don't have to tell you our number is up," Ripley said in quite another tone. "We've forked our last bronc unless we keep our eyes open."

"You don't have to waste yore breath tellin' me that," Grumpy growled. "I ain't feeble-minded! If they come at me ag'in, somebody's goin' to git a gun bent over his head!"

Rainbow walked down to the boat with Grumpy. They found Karen

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talking to Miss Wattress.

"Anne and I were just agreeing that we would not find anything more beautiful than this anywhere on the river," Karen told him. "It will be even more breath-taking when the afternoon shadows begin to play over the cliffs. Do you suppose I would be able to get a heavy camera up the wall three or four hundred feet?"

"I suppose you might find a place where it could be done," Rainbow said. "It would take time. If you want to have a try at it, I'll give you a hand."

"I'm afraid you've let yourself in for something," Anne Wattress laughed. "Karen has her eye on that deep bench halfway up to the rim."

Rainbow studied the wall for a minute or two. "Maybe we can reach it. If you'll agree to pack the lunch and a canteen, Karen," he said laughingly, "I'll promise to lug the camera."

The pleasantly warm day and the bright sunshine had a heartening effect on Karen. Ripley had never seen her so gay and carefree.

After being turned back several times, Rainbow found a way up the wall. It was a hard, though not particularly dangerous, climb.

"This is glorious!" she cried as they reached the bench and she turned to drink in the view in every direction. "I'm going to squander plates recklessly!"

"Not until we've rested and had lunch," Rainbow advised. "We can stay here two hours. That will give us plenty of time to get down before dark."

Karen gave the occasion a holiday air. Rainbow found it contagious, and the tragedy and intrigue that were tightening their grip on the Hammersley Expedition were temporarily forgotten. The rich presence of this girl seemed to reach out and touch his world with a strange, pulsing ecstasy. In the end it brought him no peace, but he could easily understand why Jim Darwin was jealous of all men.

IF Karen suspected the trend of Rainbow's thoughts she gave no sign of it. When she had exhausted the supply of dry plates she had brought along, she saw him glance at his watch.

"I suppose it's time for us to be packing up," she said. Her tone was frankly regretful. "It's been a grand day. I've enjoyed every minute of it. I wish you were going all the way with us, Rainbow. I suppose when we say good-by in Brown's Park it will be the last we shall see of you."

"I hope not," he murmured. "You have a long way to go. I have a hunch I'll be running into you again." His intentions in this regard were more definite than he cared to put into words.

"I wish I could take that as a promise," Karen said frankly. "It would be nice to know that someone was looking out for us." He saw her square her shoulders resolutely as old misgivings assailed her.

"We'll make it a promise," Rainbow said, with a sudden tightening of his lips. "If anything goes wrong, I'll come after you and get you out."

Karen's eyes came up slowly and held his. Something ran between them as they stood there that was not to be put into words. The girl asked herself a question, and could not answer it. But she had a deeper and clearer understanding of this tall man.

"Thank you," she whispered.

They returned to camp to find Darwin and the others back ahead

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of them. Supper was ready. As they ate, Hammersley was able to tell them that progress had been made in repairing the boat and that they would be able to leave late the following morning.

There was no reason why a fire could not be enjoyed. Later in the evening a full moon peered down into the canyon, adding a romantic touch. Darwin played on his mouth organ, and there was singing. Grumpy, who would have enjoyed the fun ordinarily, had too much on his mind to enter into it. Biding his time, he got Rainbow aside.

"Along with my art work, I picked up some facts today that'll come purty close to tellin' you what this business is all about," he began.

"Yeah?" Rainbow queried. "You sound serious enough. Since you got your information from Miss Wattress, I suppose your facts concern Karen."

"Yo're dead right!" the little fellow agreed sharply. "Did yuh know it was her money that's payin' for this grand splash?"

"No."

"Waal, it is! Hammersley's been operatin' on her bank account for a long time. Her father was one of these famous scientists, too. Him and Hammersley dug up somethin' or other out in China years ago. Then he gits sick out there and dies, and when his will is read, Hammersley is the executor and this Thane girl is his ward. She's just a little tot then, of course."

"Nothing so irregular about that," said Rainbow. "Where does the skulduggery come in that's got you all steamed up?"

"Just wait!" Grumpy growled. "This Breckenridge Thane is a rich man; he leaves his daughter half a million or more. But the girl don't get her hands on none of it . . . not even when she grows up and comes of age. There's a clause in the will that makes Hammersley the administrator of the estate till she gets married. Waal, don't look at me as though you didn't know the answer! You just got to put two and two together! Hammersley didn't have nuthin' till old Thane died. Since then there's been Hammersley Expeditions all over the map!"

RIPLEY gave him a silencing glance. "Suppose we slow up a little and see what the facts add up to instead of going off half-cocked. Does Miss Wattress think Hammersley has been using the estate for his own ends?"

"Hell's fire, no! She thinks the old galoot is a hundred percent all right. So does the girl! You can see how *she* trusts him. But we ain't swallowin' that with what we know." Grumpy lowered his voice at the sound of footsteps. Two of Brant's men strolled down the shore. He waited until they were out of earshot. "Now I'll tell you somethin' else. Hammersley's done his best to keep that girl from marrying. He's been luggin' her off with him for three or four years. But this young Darwin wouldn't have it that way. Miz Wattress says they're engaged . . . or close to it."

"So I figured." In the shadows Rainbow's mouth had a grim set.

"That all you got to say?" Grumpy demanded fiercely. "Do you mean to tell me you can't see that it's the girl them wolves is after? Hammersley don't intend to lose his easy pickin's. That girl will never leave these canyons alive!"

"No," Rainbow disagreed. "That wouldn't explain all these elaborate preparations."

"Wouldn't it? If we had been rubbed out this mornin', who could

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have said it wasn't just an accident? There'll be more accidents, I'm tellin' you! Murder without a kickback, just because the perfessor was smart enough to dress it up with all these trimmin's!"

Ripley shook his head. "I can't believe it . . . not that I'd put it past Hammersley and the Jap. But that isn't the full extent of their game. It couldn't be. There's Brant and Morgan. They're all out for something, too. It couldn't be Karen."

"I don't know why it couldn't," the hard-headed little man persisted. "Brant and the perfessor is stickin' together till they get rid of us. Labelle proved that to us this mornin'. But Brant's goin' to take charge of things when the time's right. He'll grab the girl and hold her till he gets his price . . . unless Blue beats him to it."

Rainbow was ready to dismiss the whole thing as utterly fantastic. "You'll find that Blue has something else on his mind, and the others, too," he said flatly.

"Mebbe," Grumpy snapped. "It's a danged good idea to remember that some gents have more'n one string to their bow, an' I'm thinkin' of Hammersley an' the Jap when I say it." He gritted his teeth savagely. "If I'm only a third right it's righter than I want to be about this."

BY ten o'clock the next morning the expedition was under way. The declivity became greater, and although the boats passed through one series of rapids after another the rapids were not of a nature to give them any trouble. The boats seemed to fly along. Without stopping, they ran past a beautiful little valley. Grumpy identified is as Little Brown's Hole.

The canyon walls continued to rise to a great height, but in an ever-widening V until it was possible to

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glimpse their battlemented rims. On those rocky turrets wind and frost had been busy for centuries. Untold tons of decaying granite seemed to totter there, waiting for a breath to send them plunging into the canyon.

The thought occurred to Rainbow as the No. 2 boat drifted swiftly down the river with only Labelle's heavy steering oar in the water. Itchi glanced aloft, too. "It is an awe-inspiring sight, Mr. Ripley," the Japanese murmured. "If those frowning ramparts were to come tumbling down they would crush an ocean leviathan."

"Yeah," Rainbow muttered. There had been little conversation in the boat that day.

"*Rapide!*" Labelle called a warning as white water appeared ahead.

Ripley was running his oar through the rowlock when a shrill cry broke from Itchi's lips. It was the first time the partners had heard him raise his voice. The next instant a muffled thunder rolled down to them. Their eyes flashed to the rim where a puff of white smoke hung in the air. The next instant a whole section of the crumbling, fancifully carved rimrock teetered drunkenly, as though trying to catch its balance, and then plunged forward and downward into space.

"Dynamite!" Grumpy yelled in Rainbow's ear.

Their own boat was out of danger. A warning cry to the others was wasted, for they were alive to their position and could do nothing to save themselves. Ripley's eyes froze as he saw Karen's boat nearest of all to the base of the wall. A shudder seemed to run over the river as the mighty avalanche of rock struck the lower slope of the cliff, a hundred feet above the water line. Rainbow saw great boulders, weighing tons, pop up into the air from that impact and sail out over the river in a wide, terrifying arc.

In near the wall a rain of small rocks fell.

"They're all right, in there!" Grumpy yelled. "But look at Potts and Thursby!"

THE No. 7 boat had been caught directly in the path of destruction. A tremendous shaft of rock struck the river within a foot or two of the bow, sending up a great spout of water that stood the frail shell on end. Two of Brant's men, Poe and Fancher, were in the boat with Thursby and Dr. Potts. Thursby and Poe managed to hang on; Potts and the other man sailed through the air as though they had been catapulted from a springboard.

The boat fell back, and its wide beam saved it from capsizing, but as it settled down on the writhing river another boulder of equal size caught it full amidships, crushing it like an eggshell and carrying it to the bottom.

"Come on!" Rainbow shouted. "We've got to get back there and pick them up!"

McBride already had his boat turned, and though rocks of smaller size, but carrying death to whatever they struck, continued to fall for several minutes, he ordered his crew to strike back up the river. They picked up Chick Fancher a few moments before Rainbow reached Dr. Potts. He brought the little man in looking like a dripping, badly frightened water spaniel. There was no sign of Thursby and Poe or the smashed boat.

"They're at the bottom of the river!" Grumpy ground out.

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"Luckily, Darwin has sense enough to keep them boats with the wimmin in where they are!"

"I'm going to send them down the river," Rainbow said with authority as Hammersley came alongside. "We're only two or three miles from Brown's Park. They'll be out of danger there."

The professor, cheeks sunken and white of face, nodded his agreement. "This has been a terrible experience, Ripley," he said, striving to regain his composure. "That wall must have been rotten to the core to topple down on us like that."

Rainbow's eyes ran cold with fury at the brazen attempt to give the tragedy the appearance of having been a natural accident. "Nothing of the sort," he said thinly. "It's time for some plain speaking between us, professor. That wall was blasted out. You know why Morgan is determined to stop you. I don't expect you to tell me, but it's plain enough that that's what he is out to do. That's why he tried to steal your boats at Black Forks. That's why Brant was almost picked off at the falls. If you want to risk your life on this river, that's your business, but the members of the expedition have got to be told where they stand."

"Mr. Ripley, has it occurred to you that the presence of you and Mr. Gibbs may explain Blue Morgan's murderous attempts on us?" Itchi was quick to ask.

"It has," Rainbow answered. "That may be the answer." Grumpy was hard put to swallow his surprise. A moment later, however, he thought he understood his partner's purpose. "When you get to Brown's Park, stay there," he heard Rainbow say. "Give us four or five days. We'll take care of Morgan!"

CHAPTER VIII

CLASHING WILLS

"COME on, Labelle," Rainbow ordered. "We're pulling into the wall!"

Big Gass hesitated, and his eyes went to Samson Brant. It was a clear-cut indication of where the Frenchman felt authority rested. Brant's glance told him to do as he had been directed. He followed it with a question to Rainbow. "How far down the park are you going?"

"The sooner we reach the Gate the better," Ripley informed him. "If we're going to make it before evening tomorrow, we'll have to run down to the mouth of Beaver Creek today."

"We'll be looking for you there," Brant said gruffly. "Don't make yourselves too hard to find." It carried a threat and a warning.

The contemptuous look that flitted across Itchi's yellow face eloquently expressed his low regard for such cheap blustering.

"You all right in here?" Rainbow called out as they came up to the three boats that had found shelter near the wall, his glance going to Karen first of all.

"Yes," Darwin answered him. "I seem to be the only one who got a scratch." There was a smear of blood on his chin. "But look at that!" He pointed to a hole in the forward bulkhead a few inches from Karen. A man could have put his head into it, and it was as sharply cut out as though the work had been done with a saw.

The compartment was filled with water, the rock having passed completely through the bottom of the boat. Rainbow's eyes narrowed grimly as he surveyed the damage and realized how close Karen had been to being killed.

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"We're going to get out of here," he said, raising his voice so all might hear. "Keep in close to the wall for a mile or two. We're just above Brown's Park. We'll come out into a valley five to six miles wide. Just follow us!" He turned to Jim. "You used your head that time. How did you manage to get in so quickly?"

"I saw the puff of smoke go up a second or two before I heard the explosion. I guess it's all that saved us."

"Rainbow, isn't there any chance that Lee Thursby and the other man may be found alive?" Karen asked. Her voice had a tense, unfamiliar tone.

Ripley shook his head. "McBride thinks they may be able to recover the bodies by waiting. They're going to stay here a while."

Dreading a repetition of the disaster, Rainbow kept the boats in so close to shore that it was often possible to reach it with the oars. He didn't try to hide the sigh of relief that escaped his tight lips when they ran out of Red Canyon into the valley of Brown's Park. The river lost its mad rush and the current became so sluggish that it was necessary to use the oars continuously.

"We'll go ashore at the first likely spot," Ripley told Labelle. "That boat of Darwin's is settling pretty low in the water. We can make some temporary repairs."

THE cook and his pots and pans had been left up the river in one of the boats that had remained at the scene of the accident, but emergency rations were available.

"The men are hungry; I suppose we should prepare something," Karen said to Rainbow. "Anne and I will attend to it."

Grumpy volunteered his assistance and he soon had a small fire burning. "This ain't the first time Rainbow and me have stuck our nose into this ole outlaw hang-out," he told Karen and Anne Wattress. "It's a right purty spot, summer or winter!"

The glades opening between the trees, carpeted with grass, had a parklike look and readily suggested how the valley had come by its name.

"It's a paradise," Anne declared. "It seems hard to believe it was once a rendezvous for rustlers and horse thieves. It looks innocent enough now."

"I don't know about that, Miz Anne," Rainbow overheard Grumpy answer. "Brown's Park has seen all kinds, but I reckon the worst of 'em couldn't hold a candle to some of the murderin', double-crossin' hombres that's usin' this country today."

Ripley knew his partner was referring to Hammersley and his fellow conspirators. He saw a question form in Anne Wattress' eyes that made him wonder if she, too, wasn't close to understanding Grumpy's thinly veiled remark.

Repairs to the boat and lunch consumed an hour. The others not having put in an appearance as yet, Rainbow gave the word to proceed down the river.

"You don't figger they've run into more trouble, do you?" Grumpy queried as he paused from laboring with the oars to mop his perspiring face. The afternoon had turned unseasonably warm.

Itchi did not turn his head, but he hung on Ripley's answer.

"If you mean another rock slide, no," the latter said. "We would have been sure to hear it. They'll have to bury Thursby and Poe. That'll take some time."

This open country, the almost

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placid river and the release from immediate danger revived the spirits of all. They reached the mouth of the Beaver and made camp, however, without seeing anything of the professor and the others who had remained with him. Ripley saw that Karen was troubled.

"You're sure they're all right?" she asked.

"Yes," Rainbow told her. "It may be midnight before they show up. We'll keep a fire going for them."

Though he dismissed it so lightly to her, he had begun to wonder if Brant had taken advantage of this division of forces to take things into his own hands. Rainbow suspected that something of the sort was running through Saburo Itchi's facile brain. But there were four of Brant's men here in camp. They were stretched out on the grass, smoking their pipes and casting interested glances at the fire where supper was being cooked. After watching them for a few minutes he was satisfied that they didn't have the look of men waiting to spring a surprise.

ITCHI was silent through the meager supper. "I am going to climb that dead tree at the water's edge, Mr. Ripley," he announced as he got up. "I should be able to see some distance up the river; it's still light enough."

"Go ahead," Rainbow told him. "You may be able to see them coming."

Grumpy stepped aside with his partner. "The Jap is worried," he muttered.

"So am I, but not about Hammersley and Brant getting here," Rainbow informed him. "Howie Hallett should be waiting with our horses down by the Gate tomorrow. That will bring things to a head with us. We're going to have trouble getting away. We know too much. If we're permitted to leave it will only be because we've sold them the idea that we can keep Blue out of their way. That would help their game. They'll weigh it against whatever trouble they feel we might make them."

"Yeah," the little one grunted. "That's about the size of our chances. Brant won't fall for it, though. He showed where he stood this mornin' when you made that crack about goin' after Blue."

"I know it," Rainbow muttered, his lean face sober and tight of lip. "Itchi is our best bet. We'll make our play now . . . as soon as he climbs out of that tree."

A shout from the Japanese announced that he could see the boats coming. In the deepening twilight he came back to the log where Rainbow and Grumpy sat. The partners pretended to have their heads together and not to be aware of his approach. Ripley had the small square of goods he had cut from Chink Johnson's shirt in his hands. He made it appear that he was examining it carefully, and, as Itchi stepped up, he hurriedly tried to conceal it, only to let the piece slip through his fingers.

He bent down to retrieve it, but the Japanese reached it first.

"Is this what you are looking for, Mr. Ripley?" Itchi questioned suspiciously.

"Yeah!" Rainbow reached out for it, but the Oriental had recognized the bright-colored sample.

"I think I know where this came from, Mr. Ripley," he murmured. His tone suggested that the discovery amused him, but his eyes told another story. "I saw that some-

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one had cut a piece out of Johnson's shirt. I wondered who had found it so interesting."

"Interesting is putting it mildly," Rainbow said with chilling inflection. "That piece of wool will send Blue Morgan to the pen!"

Itchi gazed at him with his blank eyes for a moment, his face expressionless. "Would you explain, please?"

Ripley handed him the sample he had received from the Wasatch Mills. "You see that they match. A shipment of those shirts was on the freight train that was wrecked at Split Mountain. It is a pattern that has not yet been placed on sale out here. Yet Johnson was wearing one."

The Japanese nodded woodenly. "He therefore must have been responsible for the wrecking of the train. Perhaps one of a gang. Obviously he helped himself to a new shirt." He handed the samples over to Rainbow. "Your story of the wreck being the result of a grudge was incorrect, I see."

"It was an attempt to stop one of the silk expresses . . . a carefully planned attempt that misfired only because the express had been laid up with a minor accident and the freight was running on her time. Blue Morgan doesn't stick up freight trains."

IT was a broadside shot, but Itchi's only sign of surprise was a more pronounced display of his heavy white teeth.

"Does that satisfy your curiosity?" Rainbow demanded thinly. He was still playing his part.

"Completely."

"O. K.! But don't ever slip up in back of me again without letting me know you're there. I don't like it." To put a sharper edge on his annoyance, Rainbow turned his back on the Japanese and walked away.

In a few minutes the boats could be seen approaching. On arriving, Hammersley quickly confirmed Rainbow's surmise as to what had held them up. They had found Thursby and Poe and buried them in Red Canyon.

The camp was quiet that night. Everyone seemed glad to reach his blankets. Grumpy had bedded down beside Rainbow.

"You almost knocked the legs out from under Itchi," the little man muttered beneath his breath. "You couldn't have handled it better. Him and Hammersley and Brant was certainly talkin' things up tonight. If it was us they was palaverin' about they shore couldn't agree on nuthin'."

"All we can do is be ready for tomorrow, no matter what it brings," Ripley said, yawning.

RUNNING down through Brown's Park the next day proved uneventful. In the early afternoon they caught their first glimpse of the unrivaled Gate of Lodore. That magnificent portal dark and lonely in its flawless grandeur, cut back into the very heart of the mountains and seemed to hold the secrets of a world beyond.

The great cleft, visible for many miles, made Karen, now the expedition's only photographer, and Anne Wattress, with her artist's eye, forget the hardships and dangers of the descent. Camera and sketchbook were in evidence all afternoon.

It had been agreed that camp would be made at Vermilion Creek. As the boats swung around the almost complete circle the river describes just above the mouth of the

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Vermilion, a man on horseback hailed them from the bank.

"It's Howie Hallett, all right!" Grumpy exclaimed in quick identification. He sent an answering cry to the Bar 7 rider.

A few minutes later McBride ordered the boats to run ashore, where camp could be made in a grove of tall cottonwoods.

"I've got the horses back on the grass a few hundred yards," Hallett told the partners. "If you're goin' to camp here, I'll bring 'em up."

"Leave 'em where they are, Howie," Rainbow advised. The gravity of his tone made the puncher raise a sharply questioning pair of eyes.

"What's the matter, Rip? You and Grump wear out your welcome with these people?"

"I'll explain that to you later," Rainbow told him. "You stick around, Howie, and keep your eyes open. We'll leave here tonight, and we may be traveling fast when we do. I'll see Hammersley now."

THE professor was with Brant and Itchi. Rainbow rightly suspected that he and Grumpy were the subject of their acrimonious discussion.

"We'll be pulling away after supper," Ripley told them. "We can reach the railroad by morning and get the horses and ourselves carried across the river to Vernal. I know where to start looking for Morgan."

"Where?" Brant watched him with scowling eyes.

"Ute Crossing. He's got a saloon there. It's a hang-out for his gang."

"And you think you'll find them waiting there for you, eh?" Brant made no attempt to hide his contempt.

"They may have drifted," Rainbow acknowledged. "But we've picked up a few trails in our time. We'll either grab Morgan or keep him so busy he won't have any time to devote to the Hammersley Expedition."

His tone didn't admit of there being any question about his leaving. Brant had no more to say, but the professor thanked Rainbow for his services and spoke regretfully of their having to part company.

Ripley left them, and he was no sooner out of hearing than Itchi declared himself. "Mr. Ripley is very clever," he said, "but he does not fool me. He evidently hopes to arrest Morgan, then turn his attention to us."

"Sure!" Brant agreed. It was the first time he had ever aligned himself with the Japanese. "If we stay here four or five days as he suggests, it would only be giving him time to square off at us. Why couldn't he and Gibbs have been in that No. 7 boat instead of Thursby and Poe? Until that pair is put out of the way we can't draw a safe breath!"

"But there would be a twofold advantage in having them busily chasing Morgan's gang," Itchi continued, quite as though Brant had not spoken. "It would remove two obstacles from our path at one stroke, doctor. That might outweigh the risk involved in permitting Ripley and Gibbs to leave."

"It would be the grossest stupidity to think otherwise," Hammersley pronounced, his piercing eyes taking fire. "It would give us a free hand for a few days. It is not necessary for us to remain here. We can start through Lodore in the morning."

"You're crazy . . . both of you!" Brant burst out wrathfully. "I've got my neck in this as deep as either one of you, and I'm going to have

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something to say about what goes on here. If Ripley and Gibbs make any attempt to leave, I'll stop them!"

The professor turned his baleful eyes on him. "You forget yourself, Mr. Brant," he said with chilling inflection. "I do not believe I underestimate the danger involved in permitting the two men to depart. When this month's Silk Express is stopped, they will suspect us. But that is something we must risk. We shall work swiftly, and we shall leave no clue for them to follow. Six to eight hours after we get the silk in our possession we'll have it hidden away where no one will find it. If it has to stay there a year before we can begin to realize on it, we'll be patient and wait. The mistake above all others that we cannot afford to make is one I had not dreamed of until a few days ago."

"Yes, I think I know what you mean, doctor," Itchi murmured unctuously. "Having accomplished all the necessary steps, it would be very embarrassing to discover at the last moment that someone else—shall we say Blue Morgan?—had got in ahead of us and stopped the Silk Express."

It was answer enough for Brant. Snarling to himself, he made his way across the camp to his men.

HAMMERSLEY and Itchi exchanged a long, understanding glance.

"The man will have to be put in his place," the professor said bluntly.

Itchi nodded. "I shall attend to it, doctor."

This camp in Brown's Park was the pleasantest they had made so far, but no one seemed to be in a mood to enjoy it. When supper was over, Karen walked to the boats. Rainbow followed in the dusk of the deepening twilight.

"You know I hate to see you go," she said with a complete frankness.

"It will be nice to be missed," he murmured, his thoughts running ahead of his words. The tone of his voice brought Karen's eyes up, bright and touched with wondering. For a moment they stood there engrossed, saying nothing.

"I didn't mean it quite that way, Rainbow. I . . . I've come to depend on you. There's strength in you. I'm sure I'm not the only one of us who has felt it. Things are not right here. Uncle and Mr. Brant are close to breaking."

"Nothing will come of it," he said with quiet conviction. "The professor is the stronger man of the two. And don't underestimate Itchi. There'll be some more switching of crews when you leave here. Don't let them take Jim or Dr. Borelius out of your boat. Promise me that," he insisted, enormously sober of a sudden. "Do what they tell you. You can depend on both of them. I'll make it my business to be in Island Park before you get there. If you don't show up after a day or two, I'll start looking for you."

"You have my promise," she said quietly, offering him her hand. Rainbow took it and stood there, a tall, square shape in the twilight. He envied Jim Darwin this girl, and it put a sadness in him that he didn't want her to see.

"I'm going to stay here a minute, Rainbow," Karen said. "Good-by."

Halfway back to camp, Ripley came face to face with Darwin. The coolness of the other's greeting needed no explanation.

"Don't get me wrong, Jim," Ripley told him. "I'm not trying to beat your time. I just told Karen

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not to let either you or Borelius be taken out of her boat, and to look to you if something goes wrong. Do you have a gun?"

"Yes."

"Well, wear it from now on."

DARWIN let him go, only to call him back. "Rainbow, I'm still acting like an ass. I'm sorry. Have you got anything else to tell me?"

Ripley gave him a long, measuring glance. "You can take this any way you please. Don't put your trust in Hammersley or the Jap."

Leaving Jim standing there, Rainbow joined Grumpy. A few minutes later they reached Howie Hallett and the waiting horses.

"You must've had things sized up wrong. Everythin's calm and peaceful," Howie said.

He spoke too soon. Suddenly Brant and seven of his men stepped out of the brush and closed in on them on the run. It was too late to reach the saddles and try to break away. Even as Rainbow dismissed that thought fists began to fly. Fancher and Revell tried to drag Grumpy down, but they found they had got hold of a fighting wild cat. The little man doubled Fancher up with a kick in the belly and turned in time to drive a smashing fist into Ginger Revell's long chin.

Rainbow realized this was not a fight; Brant's orders were to pull them down and tie them up. Brant tried to smother him, but a long whistling right drove him back. Howie was more than holding his own, too. But the odds were too one-sided to leave the result long in doubt.

The next moment help came from an unexpected source. Rainbow saw a man dart out from between the nervous horses and catch Revell by the shoulders and toss him over his head. It drove Brant and the others back. Saburo Itchi stood there, a gun in his leveled hand.

"My marksmanship hardly can be compared with yours, Mr. Brant," he said, his tone inflexible and apologetic at the same time, "but I could hardly miss at this distance. These men will be permitted to leave. That is Dr. Hammersley's order."

CHAPTER IX

CUNNING OF THE LAWLESS

ONCE the partners and Hallett had climbed out of Brown's Park Rainbow struck off across a broken mountain plateau that brought them back to within several miles of the river. There they rolled into their blankets for a few hours. Silverbow, a flag stop ten miles east of the Green, was their ultimate destination, but when dawn broke they swung even farther to the west and reached the rim high above the Canyon of Lodore. This maneuver had but one purpose, and the morning was still young when it rewarded them with a definite answer. Far up the canyon they could see the boats coming.

"Wait three or four days!" Grumpy burst out sarcastically. "Why, we didn't no more'n have our backs turned before they was sneakin' down the river! If we didn't know no more'n this it would tell us enough! It ain't only Blue Morgan they're tryin' to run away from!"

Rainbow agreed fully. "It doesn't leave us much time," he said gravely.

They could see Upper Disaster Falls in the distance, a long series of rapids terminating in a sharp drop. From the head of the white water to the dangerous sag below the falls the descent was fully fifty feet. With a twenty-mile current driving it, the river seemed to be

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torn to milky shreds. Seen from the rim this beginning of Hell's Half Mile was a scene of wild, incomparable beauty, its thunder rising in a deafening roar.

"We'll wait a minute!" Rainbow shouted. "I want to see what McBride's going to do about this!"

Down in the half-mile-deep trough of Lodore the boats seemed to be just so many plunging match sticks. Rainbow and Grumpy saw McBride frantically drive the lead boat into the west bank. When it appeared that they could not make it, the crew leaped into the water, found footing and dragged it ashore, then turned to catch the others as they swept in.

"Unloadin'!" Grumpy called out. "Goin' to work the boats down along the shore empty!"

Rainbow nodded, visibly relieved. "They'll run Lodore all right if they use their heads thataway! Well, I guess we can be pulling out for the railroad!"

A STATION and some seldom-used shipping pens was the extent of Silverbow. Noon had come and gone before the partners caught their first glimpse of it.

"You goin' to try an' git in touch with Moran?" Grumpy queried. "I reckon he's wondering what we're doin'."

"I'll send him a wire," answered Rainbow. "If we went into Platte City it would take time, and Tom might not approve of slapping Yampa Jackson into jail just to throw Morgan off the scent. Corporations don't like damage suits."

"A damage suit from that old owl-hoot?" Grumpy scoffed. "Why, that

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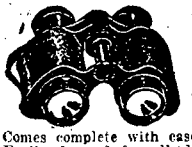

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grease-caked buzzard has busted every law in the book!"

The agent dispatched Ripley's telegram and agreed to flag the first local freight that would carry them across the river into Utah.

"I guess this is where I say so long," Howie told the partners. "This came just at the right time," he grinned. "I missed the worst of the spring work; the roundup wagon was just startin' out when I left the ranch. Time I get back—"

"Howie, you'll do just as well by going across the river with us and finding your way home over Ute Pass," Rainbow cut in. "Suppose you stick around with us a few days. You may come in handy. I'll square it with the judge."

Howie rubbed his long, humorous nose. "Well, I don't mind lookin' at a little trouble if I got the right tools for it in my hand. I'll string along, Rip."

"You're a stranger around Vernal?" Ripley asked.

"Yeah."

"Fine! We'll have you put off out in the hills somewhere. You drift into town then, and don't give anyone any reason to think we're friends. I fancy we'll be watched soon after we arrive. If we want to get in touch with you, or you with us, we'll have to be careful how we go about it."

Three days later the partners located Yampa Jackson near the Uinta Agency. They immediately swore out a warrant against him and assisted the sheriff in serving it. Vehemently protesting his innocence, the old man was slapped into jail, accused of responsibility for the Split Mountain wreck.

The news reached Blue Morgan at Ute Crossing a few hours later. Yampa's arrest didn't interest the outlaw as much as the fact that Rainbow and Grumpy had left the

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Hammersley Expedition and were back in Utah.

"They must've split up in Brown's Park," Morgan told Ben Ruby, who had brought him the news. "It's the only place where they could've got out."

"Blue, where does that leave us?" Ben asked. He had lived outside the law most of his life and had grown tough and shrewd in the process. "Slappin' old Yampa into the calaboose don't sound on the level to me. Ripley an' Gibbs are workin' for the railroad, ain't they? If they'd gone after the old coot when they was here two weeks ago, it would have been different. I could have believed that. I'd have said they was just makin' a dumb play. After all, they ain't no smarter than anybody else. But instead they go prancin' off with them boats."

"I don't know, Ben," Morgan declared weightily as he paced up and down behind his bar. "If that pair is dumb enough to let Brant pull the wool over their eyes they may figger Yampa is the party they've been after." His upper lip curled away from his teeth in a characteristic gesture. "Whatever it is, it's no skin off our noses! They're not comin' back with anythin' on us. Sure they know Chink was lined up with me. He got killed tryin' to steal their boats. But maybe he was on his own. Why should I know anythin' about it?"

RUBY pushed back his hat and scratched his bald head, doubt riding him. "They know somebody came mighty near knockin' Brant off," he muttered skeptically. "They know half a mountain was dumped on 'em. You mean to tell me they'll miss suspectin' us?"

"Let 'em," Blue sneered. "They can't prove nothin'." He ran a cold eye over Ben Ruby, Wild Bill and the others lined up along the bar and realized that they were not convinced. "You boys are forgettin' that Ripley and his pardner ain't got no reason to think I know Brant from Adam."

"Yo're right," Wild Bill Walsh declared. "That's somethin' we overlooked. But this thing shouldn't be allowed to drift along, Blue—"

"I don't aim to let it," Morgan whipped out. "I'll ride into Vernal tomorrow and be lookin' for a face down. Try keepin' an eye on 'em?"

"Yeah, Crutcher and three or four others," Ben told him.

"Suppose the rest of you drift in now," Blue advised. "We'll have backin' enough to see it through however it goes. What Ripley doesn't say will give us a line on what's up. If he doesn't make a crack about Chink and what happened in Red Canyon, you can be doggoned sure that juggin' Yampa is just a gag to throw dust in our eyes."

Morgan arrived in Vernal about noon of the following day. He rode with a confident swagger, and men on the street turned to watch him with a remote, furtive interest.

From the hotel window Grumpy and Rainbow saw him rack his horse in front of the saloon opposite and disappear between the swinging doors. They knew they were being watched and had been for twenty-four hours. They were also aware of the presence of Ben Ruby, Tay Crutcher, Wild Bill and all the rest of Blue's cohorts.

"He's here to ask 'How come,'" Grumpy observed, his hard-bitten face settling into deeper lines. "'Pears to me we've got all our eggs in one basket this time, and she's a basket with a weak handle."

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"What do you mean?" Rainbow asked without shifting his gaze from the saloon. Howie Hallett leaned his lanky length against one of the uprights that supported the wooden awning in front of the place. Rainbow nodded to Howie, and the latter immediately followed Blue inside. Grumpy got all this.

"I mean we can't play too innocent or that bunch will smell a mouse," he muttered. "We're supposed to be sittin' back now, waitin' for Morgan to make a move that'll lead us to Hammersley and Brant and crack things wide open in general. He'll never do it if we act fishy."

"We'll walk in over there with a proper chip on our shoulder," the other answered. "Come on!"

RAINBOW led the way across the tawny dust of Vernal's main street with a long stride. Behind the saloon's swinging doors the head and shoulders of Ben Ruby disappeared at once.

"Blue doesn't intend to be surprised," was Ripley's thought. Stepping through the doors, he let his glance run to the corners of the barroom and back, and its details were stamped on his brain with photographic clearness. Blue stood with his back to the bar, elbows on the rail. Ruby and the others were conveniently arranged on either side of him. Howie sat in a chair, his hat on his lap, looking as though he had no concern with what went on about him. There had been noise, empty laughter, here a moment before. It was gone now, and Rainbow saw unmistakable signs of tension in the dark faces turned toward him. The pattern of this moment was a thoroughly familiar one. A faint hint of a smile touched his tightly clamped lips as he pondered the fact that Morgan found reinforcements of such size necessary.

"I'm glad you rode in, Blue," he said with sharp hostility. "It'll save me the bother of looking you up."

"Is that so?" Morgan inquired, lips barely moving. "I didn't know there was anythin' you had to see me about."

"Then maybe I can refresh your memory. I don't know what you've got against the Hammersley Expedition, and I don't care. Maybe it's what they think . . . that you're just trying to square what happened to Chink Johnson. That was my idea when you started sniping at Brant."

"Forget it, Ripley," Blue jeered. "I don't know nothin' about this Hammersley bunch except what I read in the newspaper."

Rainbow ignored the interruption. "You've been on the wrong side of the fence ever since I've known you, Blue, but I always figured you were a cut above the ordinary run of blacklegs I've had to deal with. I changed my mind about that when you sent that wall tumbling down on us. There were women in those boats; they might have been drowned as well as the two men who got it."

"Fairy tales!" Morgan pretended to be amused. "If you had anythin' like that on me you wouldn't be around here talkin' about it. You'd have a warrant out, and you'd be busy gettin' it served."

"You're right," Rainbow acknowledged. "We know the evidence we have against you won't stand up in court. Suppose we forget the law and make this personal."

He felt rather than saw Morgan's men draw apart and loosen up. Grumpy stepped back, to. Ripley read the movement for what it was —the usual prelude to a quick draw.

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Across the barroom Howie Hallett leaned back in his chair, his hat still in his lap, and pretended to have only a bored, obscure interest in the argument. Blue read these things with equal understanding.

"Sure," he muttered, his slitted, opaque eyes enormously alert. He knew Howie had a gun in his lap under his hat. It left the odds all on Blue's side, but he didn't want a gunplay out of this, and he was ready to do a little crawling to avoid it. He had come to town to get some information. It was his now, and he didn't intend to waste it here. "That's pretty clever of you, Ripley." Blue's laugh was a grating effort. "You'd like to catch me with a gun, would you, knowin' I'm on parole? But this will keep for another time. Tell your friend over there in the chair to put on his hat and slip his gun back into the holster. It might go off and hurt him." He jerked his head at Ben Ruby and the others. "Come on, boys! We got some business down the street."

They started out, but Rainbow stepped in Morgan's way. "Blue, the yellow streak in you gets wider by the minute."

IT was almost too much for Morgan. His lips twitched murderously, and for a moment the issue again hung in doubt. But in some far-off corner of Blue's brain a warning bell rang. "That's a mouthful you'll have to eat some day, Ripley," he growled, "and you'll get the bellyache doin' it!"

Rainbow let him go. From the doorway he saw the man turn into a saloon farther down the street.

"I don't git it," declared Grumpy, shaking a puzzled head. "That's not Blue's speed to let you put the crawl on him like that. He must have somethin' mighty important on his mind that he ain't goin' to be shaken loose from."

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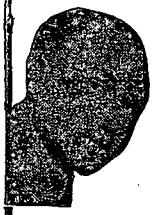

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"No question about it," Rainbow agreed. "But I'm satisfied. He figures he got about all we know. That's what he was after. I predict that crowd won't be around town long now."

"But how did he spot me?" Howie demanded unhappily. "I thought I had that bunch euchred."

"One of his spies," Rainbow answered. "The town seems to be full of 'em. Every move we make is going to be watched. It means that when that bunch slips away and we go tagging after them they'll be sure to know it."

"Why can't we cross 'em up by leavin' here the same way we come?" Grumpy demanded. "No trick to have the hosses put in a box car and have the railroad dump us out in the brush where we want to get off. That bunch won't do nuthin' till they've had a big powwow, and that'll take 'em back to Ute Crossin' for a day or two."

"It'll be taking a chance on losing them altogether," Ripley answered. "But anything will be better than being cooped up here with our hands tied, and that way we can get Howie out of this, too."

"No, Rip!" Hallett protested. "I'm seein' this through now! Morgan hurt my feelin's when he showed me up. I ain't so simple as all that."

"All right," Rainbow agreed. "They know you now, Howie. They'll stop you just as quick as they would Grumpy or me. The two of you go down to the station and tell the agent what you want. I'll settle up at the hotel. Don't bother with trying to hide what we're doing. Morgan will know what we're up to before we even get the horses loaded."

THE dispatch with which the news reached Blue fully justified Ripley's observation. The outlaw professed to find it to his liking.

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"Boys, they're doin' just what I told you they would," he declared confidently. "They don't intend to lose sight of us. Ten, twelve hours from now they'll be watchin' Ute Crossin'. And that's exactly what I want 'em to be doin'! Just so they'll be sure they'll find us there, we'll head back right now!"

Morgan had not lost face with his crowd over the incident in the saloon. In fact, the reverse was true. Thanks to the way he had handled the situation, they believed they knew where they stood now. Blue summed it up for them as they rode north.

"We can forget about that freight wreck. Mad as Ripley was, he'd have made some crack about it if he and Gibbs suspected us. They'll prosecute old Yampa, and that'll be the end of it." He laughed disparagingly. "That pair would ride you into the ground if you was doin' a little rustlin'. But that's about the size of 'em. They're way over their heads on anythin' like this. Why, they were in those boats for ten days with Brant and never tumbled to what's up!"

Ben Ruby wagged his bald head: "Leastwise they got savvy enough in 'em to know who was givin' them boats hell."

"And smart enough to know there ain't anythin' they can do about it," Blue snapped.

He had no more to say, and whenever a question was put to him his answer was to shut up; that he was thinking. That evening in Ute Crossing, he startled his men by announcing that he was changing his plans.

"Yeah, I mean it," he told them. "Instead of tryin' to smash Brant, we're goin' to help him. We know what the boats are for. We'll give that bunch a chance to use 'em."

"Blue, yo're crazy!" Wild Bill Walsh objected furiously. "If the Silk Express is stopped this month we'll never get another crack at her! Yuh was right when yuh said our play was to let things quiet down for a time . . . stop Brant or anyone else who tried to start somethin'!"

"Sure I was right," Morgan agreed. "But I got somethin' better now. What's wrong with lettin' them fellers make the haul and cache the stuff. They'll have to hide it out in a hurry. Where could they find a better place than Island Park? The silk'll be hot; they'll have to leave it there a few weeks. That'll give us all the time we want. We'll just take the stuff away from them. Ain't that easier than grabbin' it off the railroad company ourselves?"

"Blue, yo're a whiz!" Ben Ruby declared admiringly. The others were equally impressed. Only Wild Bill remained unconvinced by the scheme.

"What about Ripley and Gibbs? Mebbe they don't figger there's anythin' queer about that expedition, but they shore expect us to have another try at bustin' it up, and they'll be out to stop us."

"Of course they will! That's what they'll be hangin' around for." Blue glared him to silence. "I got that figured out, if you'll let me finish. We've got to be sure that bunch over on the river has a free hand. A week will be time enough; the express will be through before then. That means we've got to keep Ripley and his friends busy, don't it?"

"Yeah—"

"Well, if we did a sneak out of here, don't you figure they'd follow us?"

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Wild Bill began to see it. A slow, crafty smile spread over his leathery face. "That's slick, Blue! Mighty slick! They'll go for it like a trout after a fly!"

"You bet they will!" Morgan grinned. "We'll go down through the Painted Bluffs and strike toward the river once or twice; that'll needle 'em up. Once we get below the railroad, we'll pull 'em all the way down across the San Blas Plateau. As long as we can make them believe we're tryin' to shake them off, they'll keep comin' after us. By the time they take a tumble to themselves the silk train will have been knocked off, and they'll be our ironclad alibi that we didn't have nothin' to do with it."

It wasn't necessary to say more; the last lingering doubt had fled from the minds of Morgan's bunch. The hard-bitten faces ranged along the bar reflected only approval of the owlhooter's shrewdness. As the outlaws stood there, filling their glasses, a mousy-looking little man hurried in.

"What is it, Smoky?" Blue demanded.

"They're up there on the bluff . . . all three of 'em!"

"Did you hear that, boys?" Morgan grinned. "They showed up even sooner than I predicted. That makes this one on the house." He opened a fresh bottle and slid it across the bar. "Drink up! We'll stick around a while and make some noise. We want 'em to know we're all here. A little later we'll start slippin' down the creek, one at a time. That little meadow where Ben killed the coyote will be a good place to meet."

"Who'll yuh leave to run the joint?" Ben Ruby asked.

"Smoky can handle it." Morgan turned to the little man with the mousy look. "Tomorrow mornin' when Ripley and Gibbs notice how quiet things is, they'll be down in a hurry. When they ask where we pulled out for, Smoky, you tell 'em Wyomin'. They'll know that's a damned lie and begin lookin' for a trail to follow." Blue's cruel mouth twitched forbiddingly. "We'll sure leave 'em one!" he growled. "Before Ripley gets to the end of it I'll change his mind for him about a thing or two!"

DOWN through the Painted Bluffs and across the railroad, Rainbow, Grumpy and Howie Hallett followed the trail that Blue Morgan left for them to find. Morgan was too smart to overplay it; a few faint horse tracks, the still-warm ashes of a campfire, a random shot when pursuit came too near, were enough for bait.

When the trail struck off toward the river the three men rode harder and with eyes sharpened for an ambush. For four days this grim game of hare and hounds ran its course without arousing their suspicions, but they possessed too deep a vein of shrewdness to be fooled for long. In the blazing white cliffs and frowning bluffs of the San Blas badlands avenues of escape were not hard to find. When the quarry failed to take advantage of them, Rainbow began to wonder. Doubt became certainty in his mind when he saw Blue's bunch deliberately pass up a chance to fade away and leave no clue to show where they had gone.

"Wait up!" he called out. "There's something wrong about this. If they wanted to get away they wouldn't be heading for that ridge. Suppose we swing off to the right and try to reach it by way of the bluffs. I want to prove something."

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, we'll be

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left high and dry if we go up that-away!" Grumpy protested. He knew this country. "There's a two-hundred-foot drop off them bluffs to the ridge. That's as far as we'd get. Blue will pull out on us and we'll never see him ag'in!"

"That's exactly what I want to find out!" Rainbow said thinly.

"What do you mean by that?" Howie and Grumpy asked as one man.

Ripley's scowl deepened. "I don't like to say it, but I'm afraid we've been taken in like a bunch of half-wits. They could have left us flat at least twice today. But there they are . . . waiting for us to come after them! We'll see what they make of this move."

THEY reached the bluffs only to find there was no way of getting down. Two hours later they were back where they had started from. A puff of smoke and the crack of a gun told them Morgan was still on the ridge.

"That tells me all I want to know," Rainbow said bitterly. "We've been at this business too long to be caught falling for stuff like this."

"By gravy, yo're right!" Grumpy raged. "We oughta be wearin' diapers, I reckon! The stinkin' ornery skunk! Puttin' us over a barrel like this! I'll bring you his ears before I'm through with him, I promise you!"

"He was shootin' for somethin'," Howie said with rare good sense. "Puttin' the hog laugh on us wasn't what he had on his mind."

"You're right!" Rainbow ground out. "They drew us down here so we'd be sure to be out of the way of something."

"It can't be the stickin' up of another silk train," Grumpy argued. "That wouldn't make sense. We

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know Morgan's got his whole gang with him here . . . a hundred miles from the railroad."

"And I suppose you could say they're just as far from the river as we are," Ripley picked him up. "So the Hammersley Expedition couldn't figure in it either."

"Waal, that's a fact, ain't it?"

"Suppose we forget the facts and start using our imaginations," Rainbow advised. "Maybe we better forget what passed between Brant and Morgan that night in Black Forks. I don't care how wild you think this is, it looks to me as though Blue is playing the other man's game."

Grumpy was about to dismiss the observation with the ridicule he believed it deserved, when suddenly he straightened up in his saddle and stared at Ripley with frozen eyes. "Rainbow, you hit it! You wouldn't listen when I tried to tell you that it was the Thane girl—"

"No, Grumpy," it's not that. If Karen Thane is in danger it's from Hammersley. There's three sides to this game, each ready to knife or use one or both of the others to pull the chestnuts out of the fire. Morgan's carried us out of this fight for a few days, but he's carried himself out of it, too. The thing for us to do now is to give him the slip and start looking for the boats. They must be down as far as Spirit Canyon by now. Another two days should put them in Island Park. We ought to be there before then. And something tells me the lid is going to be blown off this whole devilish business!"

Will Rainbow and Grumpy get back to the expedition in time to keep Hammersley from robbing the silk train? What new danger threatens Karen? Will Blue follow the two detectives? Another spine-chilling installment of PARDNERS OF THE BADLANDS appears in next week's issue.

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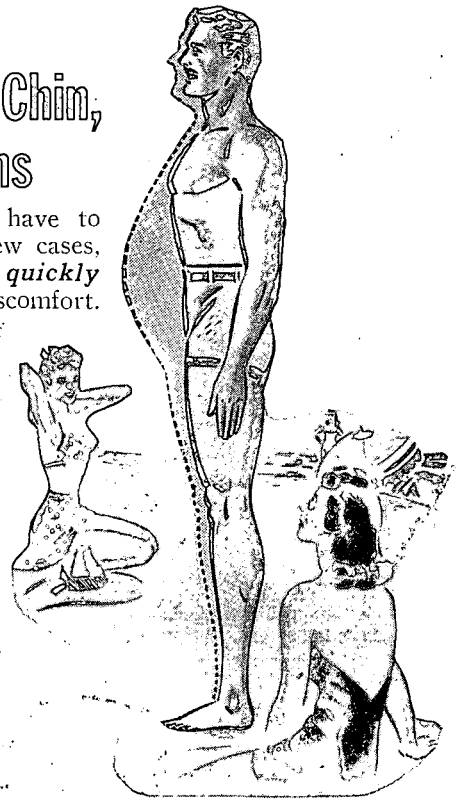

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